An Analysis of British Army Veterans' Oral Testimony and the Campaign in Northwest Europe, 1944-1945

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Abstract

War veterans have long been seen as natural subjects for oral history, and the task of collecting their reminiscences has been the focus of substantial attention by institutions such as the Imperial War Museum. Military historians often draw upon such interviews in their research; however, their handling of this evidence remains hesitant and largely divorced from the substantial theory which has been developed by academic oral historians. Oral historians have themselves devoted little attention to the particular problems posed by the use of veterans' testimony. This thesis applies oral history theory to the testimony of thirty-three British Army veterans of the 1944-5 campaign in Northwest Europe, in order to explore the unique features of veterans' oral history and assess its usefulness in military history. This involves firstly establishing the basic reliability of oral evidence, and then considering the effects of popular memory, the individual circumstances of the interviewees, and trauma, in order to gain a well-rounded understanding of the distortions that can arise in veterans' testimony. The interview evidence is then applied to three key issues of the 1944-5 campaign, combat experience, morale, and doctrine, to assess the contribution it can make to key issues in military history. The thesis outlines a more complex understanding of veteran's testimony than has previously been put forward, and contends that when subjected to an appropriate research methodology interview evidence can be a valuable tool in the military historian's arsenal.

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Introduction

'Oral history goes naturally with military history. After all, veterans have told their war stories since time immemorial'.[1] Eyewitness evidence has long been a tool employed by military historians aware of its potential to reveal aspects of combat, morale and the experience of war which are poorly recorded in written documentation. Since the early a 1970s a vast literature on war experience has been produced,[2] and this has been paralleled by the creation of substantial military oral history archives across the Anglophone world. The Imperial War Museum's Department of Sound Records, now the Sound Archive, was established in 1972 and holds over 33,000 recordings;[3] it has since been joined by archives such as the Liddle Collection, with over 4,000 biographical interviews, and the Second World War Experience Centre, which preserves material relating to around 8,700 individuals.[4] Specialised military collections also exist in the United States: The National World War II Museum holds nearly 7000 oral histories, the Rutgers Oral History Archives 871, and the Wisconsin Veterans Museum over 2000.[5] Yet despite the evident interest in collecting personal accounts

[1] Edward M. Coffman, 'Talking About War: Reflections on Doing Oral History and Military History', *Journal of American History*, 87 (September, 2000), p. 582.
[2] The refocussing from generalship to the experience of the man on the ground was inaugurated by John Keegan's *The Face of Battle* (London, 1976) and applied most prominently to the Second World War by John Ellis, *The Sharp End of War* (Newton Abbot, 1980). See also John Ellis, 'Reflections on the Sharp End of War', in Paul Addison and Angus Calder (eds.), *Time to Kill: The Soldier's Experience of War in the West 1939-1945* (London, 1997), pp. 12-13.
[3] 'Imperial War Museum', <http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/sound> [accessed December 2017].
[4] Peter H. Liddle and Matthew J. Richardson, 'Voices from the Past: An Evaluation of Oral History as a Source for Research into the Western Front Experience of the British Soldier, 1914-18', Journal of Contemporary History, 31/4 (October, 1996), p. 655; 'Second World War Experience Centre Trustees' Report' (2016), <https://apps.charitycommission.gov.uk/Accounts/Ends65/0001072965_AC_20161231_E_C.pdf> [accessed December 2017], p. 4.
[5] 'The National WWII Museum', <http://www.ww2online.org/content/faqs> [accessed December 2017]; 'Rutgers Oral History Archives', <http://oralhistory.rutgers.edu/> [accessed December 2017];

of war, such sources remain under-analysed and their uses under-theorised. There still exists a certain reticence among military historians about using oral testimony: it is suspected of being inherently unreliable due to the limitations of human memory and the doubtful representativeness of individual experiences. Meanwhile, since the 1960s oral history has developed into 'a sophisticated theoretical field in its own right',[6] whose practitioners have produced theoretical and methodological principles to enable them to handle their idiosyncratic sources. Few of these advancements, however, have been applied to the unique context of military history. For instance, it is well understood that culture causes retrospective distortions in the way the past is remembered, but this consideration is absent from most assessments of veterans' testimony, which appear well-intentioned but simplistic in the light of current oral history theory.

This thesis aims to answer the broad question: 'What can soldiers tell us about their war experiences which is of genuine worth in historical research?'. It primarily analyses thirty-three interviews with British Army veterans of the 1944-5 Northwest European campaign. It will consider oral sources as peculiar in the way they must be analysed, requiring a particular and specialised set of theoretical and methodological tools. Unique considerations are presented by the particular military context, which have been neglected to date, and so issues arising from the popular memory of the Second World War, narrative trends in accounts of war, and discourses around wartime trauma and veterancy,[7] are explored. In contrast to these unique approaches required

'Wisconsin Veterans Museum', <https://www.wisvetsmuseum.com/oral-histories/> [accessed December 2017].

[6] Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (Abingdon, 2010), p. 8.

[7] Defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as 'The state or condition of being a veteran'.

when *analysing* military testimony, it will be argued that oral testimony is *not* peculiar in its interpretative usage, as the information it provides is not inherently different to that contained in any other source. In this way the thesis will propose how the distinctive fields of oral history and military history might more fruitfully be combined and suggest new approaches to the use of veterans' testimony. As a foundation, this introduction will constitute a critique of the current research aims of oral history and call for greater rigour in the handling of oral sources in military history.

The term 'oral history' can refer to 'the process of conducting and recording interviews with people in order to elicit information from them about the past' as well as 'the product of that interview';[8] however, this basic definition has been subject to a vast range of different research aims and methodologies, resulting in an extremely varied field of study which is truly interdisciplinary, drawing on approaches from social science, anthropology, psychology, linguistics, and literary criticism as well as history.[9] It may therefore immediately be asked why oral historians cannot be trusted to turn their attentions in one more direction, towards military matters. Indeed, war and oral history have always been closely interlinked, and many of the most influential texts in the field focus on the subject of war.[10] Nonetheless, oral history approaches generally have little in common with those in military history, and the two fields remain largely incompatible.

[8] Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 2.
[9] Alistair Thomson, 'Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History', *Oral History Review*, 34/1 (2007), pp. 62-4.
[10] Alistair Thomson, *Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend* (Oxford, 1994); Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* (London, 1994); Alessandro Portelli, *The Order Has Been Carried Out: History, Memory and Meaning of a Nazi Massacre in Rome* (Basingstoke, 2007); Penny Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives: Discourse and Subjectivity in Oral Histories of the Second World War* (Manchester, 1998).

Oral History and Military Testimony

Part of the problem arises from the context of British academic discourse. This is one of many cases in which the peculiarities of British oral history can be illustrated by reference to the situation in the United States, where oral history has been an accepted tool of historical research for far longer, and, moreover, has received greater official validation. The first large-scale American oral history projects were government-backed, while the first oral history archives were designed to record the histories of 'great men', rather than reveal the hidden lives of the marginalised[11]—although the latter aim was more than fulfilled by the work of figures such as Studs Terkel and Alex Haley.[12] The US military has been a keen proponent of oral history since the Second World War[13]—related to a general interest in official history-writing and innovative methods of statistical monitoring[14]—and all branches of the US military now conduct oral history for historical, doctrinal and training purposes.[15]

Such official support for oral history has not been the norm in the United Kingdom. There the field grew out of radical political roots outside the academy, intended not

[11] Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, Third Edition (New York, 2015), pp. 5-6. Subsequent references are to this edition unless otherwise stated. See also Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 4; Thomson, 'Four Paradigm Transformations', pp. 51-2.
[12] See also Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany, 1980), and Ronald Grele, *Envelopes of Sound: The Art of Oral History* (New York, 1991), for two influential espousals of oral history by American scholars.
[13] By the end of the war US Army historians had conducted over 7000 interviews in Europe alone. Stephen E. Everett, *Oral History: Techniques and Procedures* (Washington, D.C., 1992), p. 7. See also Stephen J. Lofgren, *U.S. Army Guide to Oral History* (Washington, D.C., 2006); Maurice Maryanow, 'Oral History and the Vietnam War: The Air Force Experience, *International Journal of Oral History*, 7/2 (1986).
[14] J.W. Ryan, and D.R. Segal, *Samuel Stouffer and the GI Survey: Sociologists and Soldiers During The Second World War* (Knoxville, TN, 2013); G. Kurt Piehler, 'Veterans Tell Their Stories and Why Historians and Others Listened', in G. Kurt Piehler and Sidney Pash (eds.), *The United States and the Second World War: New Perspectives on Diplomacy, War and the Home Front* (New York, 2010), pp. 216-235.
[15] Ibid., p. 223.

to support but to contest traditional and official history work.[16] This led to a particular focus on labour, class, gender and minority history, particularly where previously marginalised experiences could be revealed. A seminal article published by the Popular Memory Group in 1982, for instance, set out one of its political goals as revealing narratives which had been neglected in the dominant interpretations of history: 'It is this hand of recovery that has become the mission of the radical and democratic currents in oral history'.[17] This is an attitude which has not conformed easily with the conservative nature of the British armed forces and military historians. The British Army has never enacted an internal oral history programme on the American model.[18] Soldiers have been a valid subject for oral history, but usually in a way which characterises them as exploited victims of a military institution which is regarded with suspicion. Assessing such prominent institutions as militaries seems antithetical to the 'recovery' role of oral history. Military historians tend to be viewed by outside academics as conservative, overly interested in distasteful military matters, and intellectually underdeveloped in their methodologies. Oral historians have therefore demonstrated more interest in revealing individual stories of war than examining the

[16] Thomson, 'Four Paradigm Transformations', pp. 51-2.
[17] Popular Memory Group, 'Popular Memory: Theory, Politics, Method', in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds.), *The Oral History Reader*, Second Edition (Abingdon, 2006), pp. 45-46. Subsequent references are to this edition unless otherwise stated. See also Thomson, 'Four Paradigm Transformations', pp. 52-3; Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 29; Penny Summerfield, 'Culture and Composure: Creating Narratives of the Gendered Self in Oral History Interviews', *Cultural and Social History*, 1/1 (2004), p. 66.
[18] Some questionnaires and interviews were conducted among British troops during the Second World War by the Weapons Technical Staff Field Forces and Directorate of Tactical Investigation, but these 'give only scattered, incidental reports on specific actions that officers were involved in, and thus do not contribute to the temporal focus that narrative military histories would find most useful'; see Robert Engen, *Canadians Under Fire: Infantry Effectiveness in the Second World War* (Montreal, 2009), pp. 29, 32; Engen, 'S.L.A. Marshall and the Ratio of Fire: History, Interpretation and the Canadian Experience', *Canadian Military History*, 20/4 (2012), p. 47.

Army as an institution or in terms of its military effectiveness.[19] To an extent, the fact historians in the two fields are largely unaware of those in the other means these differences are rarely articulated, but the attitude is summed up by Megan Hutching:

> My own background is as a social historian, and while it was possible that the project I was involved with could have been done by a military historian, I was eager to do it because I thought that I would approach it in a different way. I wanted to examine the effect of taking part in war on the individuals concerned, instead of concentrating on military strategy, accounts of battles, advances and retreats, and technical information about military materiel, which are the focus of standard accounts of war, intended as omniscient overviews of the military action.[20]

While Hutching's commitment to articulating the experience of individual soldiers is admirable, she appears to possess a rather outmoded and oversimplified idea of what military historians actually do. With the advent of 'war and society' approaches and 'the new military history',[21] and increasing numbers adopting the broader title of 'historians of war' rather than military historians,[22] most would certainly be interested in the effect of war on the individual participants. Hutching moreover fails to conceive of the possibilities for oral testimony to help inform the 'omniscient overviews of the military action' which she so derides, and conversely for traditional campaign histories to provide the essential background information for oral history projects involving war veterans. The result of such attitudes is that oral historians' work with veterans is

[19] Thomson, *Anzac Memories*; Thomson, '*Anzac Memories* Revisited: Trauma, Memory and Oral History', *Oral History Review*, 42/1 (2015), pp. 1-29; Sean Field, '"Shooting at Shadows": Private Ian Field, War Stories and Why He Would not be Interviewed', *Oral History*, 41/2 (Autumn, 2013), pp. 75-86; Bill Nasson, 'Springbok on the Somme: Joe Samuels, A South African Veteran of the Great War', *Oral History*, 25/2 (Autumn, 1997), pp. 31-38.
[20] Megan Hutching, 'After Action: Oral History and War', in Donald A. Ritchie (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History* (Oxford, 2011), pp. 233-4.
[21] Stephen Morillo and Michael F. Pavkovic, *What is Military History?* (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 37-43.
[22] This view was in evidence at the conference entitled 'War in Contemporary and Historical Perspective' which took place at King's College London on 5th June 2017.

usually limited to informing narrow assessments of personal experience, not broad studies which consider war at all its varying levels of complexity.

This divide parallels Yuval Noah Harari's view that there exist two competing approaches to first-hand accounts in the study of war. Military historians by and large continue to view veterans as 'eye-witnesses' who can report objective facts about their experiences; facts which the historian can amass and use to make judgements about the past. Oral historians, by contrast, are far more likely to view their interviewees as 'flesh-witnesses', who have gained through their experiences holistic, sensory and experiential knowledge which cannot truly be transferred to others who have not had the same experiences.[23] Since in this conception personal accounts cannot transmit objective knowledge, it is unsurprising that oral historians make relatively little effort to amass such knowledge, and instead focus on expounding individual life experiences.

A reluctance to engage with the nuts-and-bolts practicalities of warfare has restricted the interpretative impact of oral history in concert with a broader shift in that field towards a preoccupation with subjectivity. It has long been acknowledged that one of the distinctive features of oral history is that it encapsulates individual subjectivity—factors such as memory, self-perception, norms of narrative form and performance, collective understandings of history and the interviewer-interviewee relationship. As Luisa Passerini states, 'the raw material of oral history consists not just in factual statements, but is pre-eminently an expression and representation of culture, and

[23] Yuval Noah Harari, 'Armchairs, Coffee and Authority: Eye-witnesses and Flesh-witnesses Speak about War, 1100-2000', *Journal of Military History*, 74/1 (Jan., 2010), pp. 53-78.

therefore includes not only literal narrations but also the dimensions of memory, ideology and subconscious desires'.[24] This seemed to provide one of its great advantages, being a window into personal experience, but also one of its greatest flaws—how could fact be determined from subjective sources? Early practitioners attempted to solve this problem by producing elaborate sampling techniques,[25] but with this approach seeming ultimately unconvincing, oral historians began to regard subjectivity not as a problem to be overcome but as an area of research to be embraced in its own right.[26] Passerini was responsible for inaugurating subjectivity as a subject of scholarship, which 'heralded the move of oral history from social science to cultural history';[27] however, it was Alessandro Portelli who turned subjectivity into 'a resource as much as a problem',[28] influentially arguing that 'Oral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing and what they now think they did'.[29] He maintained that subjectivity was also a fact of history, and that assessing subjective distortions can tell historians a great deal about what an event *meant* in the minds of the witnesses, so that 'the discrepancy between fact and memory ultimately enhances the value of the oral source'.[30]

[24] Luisa Passerini, 'Work Ideology and Consensus Under Italian Fascism', *History Workshop Journal*, 8 (1979), p. 84.
[25] Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 80; Trevor Lummis, 'Structure and Validity in Oral Evidence', in Perks and Thomson (eds.), *Oral History Reader*, pp. 255-60; William Moss, 'Oral History: An Appreciation', in David K. Dunaway and Willa K. Baum (eds.), *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology* (London, 1996), p. 111; John Murphy, 'The Voice of Memory: History, Autobiography and Oral Memory', *Historical Studies*, 22/87 (1986), pp. 158, 171, 175.
[26] Thomson, 'Four Paradigm Transformations', p. 55.
[27] Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 7.
[28] Thomson, *Anzac Memories*, p. 228.
[29] Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany, 1991), p. 50.
[30] Ibid., pp. 26, 50-1.

In this argument Portelli was undeniably convincing. However, it was as a result of this shift, along with the rise of postmodernist approaches to history,[31] that the oral history field has allowed the issue of interpreting past events to fall by the wayside. Portelli himself was careful to note that if oral history 'tells us less about *events* than about their *meaning*, this does not imply that oral history has no factual validity', and that acknowledging subjectivity does not permit total interpretative freedom for the researcher.[32] Likewise, Paul Thompson reminded readers that historical interpretation remains the ultimate goal, and warned against 'a merely self-stimulating circular process, through which we become more and more involved with the linguistic or interactional structure of the memory we are examining, and less and less concerned about the message which is actually there in the memory.'[33]

However, this appears to be exactly what has happened. In oral history, and related fields which have arisen alongside it such as memory studies, exploring human subjectivity has become the main aim of research, so that 'it is precisely that interplay

[31] Abrams, *Oral history Theory*, p. 57; Daniel James, *Doña Maria's Story: Life History, Memory, and Political Identity* (London, 2000), p. 123; James A. Holstein and Jaber F. Gubrium, *The Active Interview* (London, 1995), p. 3. See Katherine Borland, '"That's not what I said": Interpretative Conflict in Oral Narrative Research', in Perks and Thomson (eds.), *Oral History Reader*, pp. 310-321 for an example of a prominent article which draws on postmodernist approaches; for critiques of such approaches see Anna Green, 'Can Memory be Collective?' in Ritchie (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, p. 101; J.P. Roos, '"Reality or Nothing": False and Repressed Memories and Autobiography', in Kim Lacy Rogers and Selma Leydesdorff (eds.), *Trauma: Life Stories of Survivors* (London, 2004), p. 213; Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History* (London, 1997).

[32] Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, pp. xi, 50.

[33] Paul Thompson, 'Believe it or not: Rethinking the Historical Interpretation of Memory', in Jaclyn Jeffrey and Glenace Edwall (eds.), *Memory and History: Essays on Recalling and Interpreting Experience* (Lanham, 1994), pp. 3, 8-11; Paul Thompson, 'The Voice of the Past: Oral History', in Perks and Thomson (eds.), *Oral History Reader*, p. 31. Numerous other scholars have remarked on the same problem: see also Patrick O'Farrell, 'Oral History: Facts and Fiction', *Quadrant*, 23 (November, 1979), p. 5; Roos, '"Reality or Nothing"', in Rogers and Leydesdorff (eds.), *Trauma*, p. 213; Green, 'Can Memory be Collective?', p. 97; Trevor Lummis, *Listening to History: The Authenticity of Oral Evidence* (London, 1987), p. 123; Louise A. Tilly, 'People's History and Social Science History', *International Journal of Oral History*, 7/4 (1983), pp. 462-3, 468, 472; Raphael Samuel, 'History and Theory', in Samuel (ed.), *People's History and Socialist Theory* (London, 1981), p. xlviii; Renato Rosaldo, 'Doing Oral History', *Social Analysis*, 4 (September, 1980), p. 89.

between what we remember, how we remember and why we remember that is of such interest to oral historians'.[34] This approach incentivises working with sources which are as problematic as possible, in order to make theoretical advancements; yet the results of such analyses are only rarely incorporated into interpretations of past events. As well as exacerbating a level of theoretical impenetrability which is off-putting to those outside the field, this means oral history all too often deals disproportionately with the contemporaneous. Practitioners are preoccupied with the way the past is remembered and described in the present, rather than with the matter of interpreting what took place in the past. As the Popular Memory Group noted, 'What is interesting about the forms of oral-historical witness or autobiography are not just the nuggets of 'facts' about the past, but the whole way in which popular memories are constructed and reconstructed as part of a *contemporary* consciousness.'[35] There are theoretical distinctions between memory studies and oral history, but these are often nominal at best. According to Donald Ritchie:

> [they] differ but are compatible. Oral history relies on people's testimony to understand the past, while memory studies concentrate on the process of remembering and how that shapes people's understanding of the past. Memory studies are often more interested in how facts are remembered and in distortion of facts than the facts themselves. But since oral historians deal so directly with long-term memory, they have incorporated memory studies into their own methodological discussions.[36]

[34] Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 81; Thomson, *Anzac Memories*, p. 228; James, *Doña Maria's Story*, pp. 123-4; Murphy, 'The Voice of Memory', p. 174.
[35] Popular Memory Group, 'Popular Memory', in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds.), *Oral History Reader*, p. 51.
[36] Donald A. Ritchie, 'Introduction: The Evolution of Oral History', in Ritchie (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, p. 12.

In reality, however, the overlaps between the two are substantial, since 'there has been a tendency to slide—often in under-acknowledged ways—between approaching [memory] as a source of raw material about the past, and as a subject for historical inquiry in its own right'.[37] Alistair Thomson, for instance, recommends 'adopt[ing] a "double-take" approach to memory, and [using] it to explore both the past (history) and the past in the present (memory)'.[38] In this wholehearted adoption of memory as subject as well as source, the goals as well as the methods of oral history have diverged from those of history in general.

When oral historians do make historical judgements, the preoccupation with subjectivity and an over-reliance on oral sources can be extremely restrictive. Gabriele Rosenthal's work interviewing German First and Second World War veterans demonstrates this clearly. She argues that differences in narrative style are 'connected to differences in the conditions for experience of the wars, and above all to the contrast between a war of immobility and a war of mobility':[39]

> The war of mobility between 1939-1945 was an experience of non-routine situations in different places with various people, and of confrontations with living persons, including both civilians and the enemy. In the trenches of the First World War it was impossible to orient oneself according to time, or to structure the days according to the sequences of an ordinary day. The veteran of World War I did not know when there would be breaks in fighting, or when he could eat or sleep...The difficulty of narrating about the First World War is a result of

[37] Joan Tumblety, 'Introduction: Working with Memory as Source and Subject', in Joan Tumblety (ed.), *Memory and History: Understanding Memory as Source and Subject* (Abingdon, 2013), p. 1.
[38] Alistair Thomson, 'Memory and Remembering in Oral History', in Ritchie (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, p. 91.
[39] Gabriele Rosenthal, 'German War Memories: Narrability and the Biographical and Social Functions of Remembering', *Oral History*, 19/2 (Autumn, 1991), p. 34.

> the difficulty of putting into some sort of sequential order the diffuse and chaotic experiences of trench warfare.[40]

These differences in experience, it is argued, resulted in different patterns in the testimony, with narratives of the First World War demonstrating more generalisations and euphemisms and a weaker chronological structure. This is a plausible conclusion, and indeed similar to some of the judgements made later in this study; unfortunately, to determine the underlying causes of these patterns Rosenthal merely utilises the testimony itself, rather than any external evidence, and consequently her resulting explanation for differences in the war experience threatens to contradict some interpretations which are well-supported by broad empirical research. Multiple scholars have stressed that the similarities between First and Second World War battles far outweighed the differences.[41] Battles in both wars produced similar numbers of casualties, were fought with similar weapons, and for the infantryman were characterised primarily by entrenchment and immobility with no enemy visible; both were liable to produce confusing and disorientating battle conditions. Both also provided ample opportunity for encounters with civilians or prisoners of war outside battle.

In some respects, furthermore, the evidence would seem to indicate the opposite conclusion to that reached by Rosenthal. Trench warfare provided the opportunity for highly structured living routines, and it is known that during trench-holding, which was

[40] Ibid., p. 36.
[41] Brian Bond, *Britain's Two World Wars Against Germany: Myth, Memory and the Distortions of Hindsight* (Cambridge, 2014), p. 86; John Ellis, 'Reflections on the "Sharp End" of War', in Addison and Calder (eds.), *Time to Kill*, pp. 14-16; Ellis, *The Sharp End*, pp. 35-7, 74; Gary Sheffield, 'The Shadow of the Somme: The Influence of the First World War on British Soldiers' Perceptions and Behaviour in the Second World War', in Addison and Calder (eds.), *Time to Kill*, pp. 29, 35-6; Terry Copp, '"If this war isn't over, And pretty damn soon, There'll be nobody left, In this old platoon…": First Canadian Army, February-March 1945', in Addison and Calder (eds.), *Time to Kill*, pp. 148-9.

the primary activity of most soldiers while in the front lines, routines were usually adhered to quite closely, particularly where tacit truces prevailed.[42] The more mobile operations of the Second World War, far from upholding routine, were if anything *more* likely to cause disruption. Evidently the two wars are *perceived* differently later in participants' lives, but by neglecting to consider wider scholarship Rosenthal is unable to determine whether or not this perception reflects retrospective subjectivity or experiential reality; this article shows clearly the misjudgements which can arise when oral sources are not properly corroborated. It is, furthermore, unusual in being susceptible to this sort of critique, because it is one of the rare studies from oral historians which does relate veterans' oral history to an interpretation of the events they experienced. Most restrict themselves to assessing individual subjectivity, and little more.

Military History and Oral Testimony

In military history, by contrast, enthusiasm for oral history is high but appreciation of aspects such as subjectivity has remained underdeveloped. Some articles and chapters have provided good overviews of the main issues but are necessarily unable to assess them in their full depth, and draw some questionable judgements (discussed in the next chapter).[43] On the rare occasion oral history theory is acknowledged, it is in a

[42] Tony Ashworth, *Trench Warfare: The Live-and-Let-Live System* (London, 1980).
[43] Nigel de Lee, 'Oral History and British Soldiers' Experience of Battle in the Second World War', in Addison and Calder (eds.), *Time to Kill*, pp. 359-368; Peter Simkins, 'Everyman at War: Recent Interpretations of the Front Line Experience', in Brian Bond (ed.), *The First World War and British Military History* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 289-313; Liddle and Richardson, 'Voices from the Past', pp. 651-674; Rodney Earl Walton, 'Memories from the Edge of the Abyss: Evaluating the Oral Accounts of World War II Veterans', *Oral History Review*, 37/1 (2010), pp. 18-34.

relatively scant manner;[44] the field as a whole is characterised by a consistent failure to consider the nuances of oral sources in any real depth. As Donald Ritchie remarks:

> Of all the academic disciplines engaged in interviewing as a research tool, professional historians have devoted the least amount of methodological attention to its problems and potentials. This laxity contrasts sharply with the intense seriousness historians bring to written sources. Authors dutifully list every manuscript collection, book, and article consulted, and then limit the bibliography of oral source to a few lines acknowledging those who "shared their knowledge" in "conversations" with the author…It remains puzzling why professional historians have accepted on faith the author's reliability in note taking, transcribing, and even interpreting oral information.[45]

While Paul Budra here discusses oral histories of the Vietnam War, it can in fact be seen that the same tendencies are apparent throughout military history writing:

> some of the most popular of these histories eschew the generally acknowledged protocols and formats of oral history itself as they have been defined by theorists…The interview processes in these books tend not to be documented; the names of the witnesses may not be given nor the questions asked of them; they contain no record of attendant document research.[46]

This is not only a problem where oral history is concerned: others have noted that in military scholarship in general 'most published research has been "cleaned up" for analytical closure in the sense of the messy processes of research having been swept away',[47] and often 'one can only distil [historians'] frame of reference, or the theory they subscribe to, from the way they construct their narrative and from their

[44] Peter Johnston, 'Culture, Combat and Killing: A Comparative Study of the British Armed Forces at War in the Falklands', PhD thesis (University of Kent, 2013), pp. 335-343.
[45] Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*. pp. 133-4.
[46] Paul Budra, 'Concatenation and History in *Nam*', in Paul Budra and Michael Zeitlin (eds.), *Soldier Talk: The Vietnam War in Oral Narrative* (Bloomington, IN, 2004), p. 53.
[47] Eyal Ben-Ari, 'Reflexivity', in Joseph Soeters, Patricia M. Shields and Sebastian Rietjens (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in Military Studies* (Abingdon, 2014), p. 31.

conclusions…in most cases historians do not make their assumptions explicit'.[48] A variety of deficiencies have arisen from this general methodological laxity; approaches in academic and popular history-writing can broadly be differentiated, but there are overlaps and similarities between the two.

Academic Military History

Among academics, the absence of theoretical tools for understanding oral history has led to hesitance, a reluctance to afford testimony too much authority. With documentary evidence still very much the mainstay of academic military history, university historians tend to use oral testimony as second-rate supplementary evidence providing anecdotal support to interpretations based primarily on written sources. A. J. P. Taylor's much-quoted assessment remains the dominant view: 'In this matter I am almost a total sceptic...Memoirs of years ago are useless except for atmosphere...diaries, when not rewritten, are useful. But old men drooling about their youth—no.'[49] It is common to see interview evidence disregarded out of hand on the basis that memory is fundamentally unreliable, a fact which oral historians would dispute.[50] The value of eyewitness testimony for revealing human experience and emotion is undeniable, but in an interpretative sense oral sources certainly play a secondary and supplementary role compared with more conventional and more trusted written and archival material. Oral history is used more often to add colour, authenticity or variety to a formulaic piece of writing, than as a source of the kind of

[48] Floribert Baudet and Eric A. Sibul, 'Historical Research in the Military Domain', in Soeters, Shields and Rietjens (eds.), *Research Methods in Military Studies*, pp. 71, 73.
[49] Brian Harrison, 'Oral History and Recent Political History', *Oral History*, 1 (1972), p. 46.
[50] Engen, *Canadians Under Fire*, p. 32. The reliability of memory is discussed at length in Chapter One.

solid factual evidence an interpretation can be based on. The amount of time and labour required to collect oral history can also be a factor here. It is easy for historians, having completed the hard work required to collect the testimony, to neglect the equally pressing matter of analysing it in the best possible manner and fall back on simpler approaches: as Lynn Abrams notes, 'Most commonly the oral source is embedded into a text as selected extracts, either used as illustrative material or what is described as "textual verifications of a historical interpretation"'.[51] In the process oral sources' distinctive features, such as orality, tend to be lost. Admittedly military historians do show themselves to be far more willing to incorporate oral history as 'just another source' than oral historians are to utilise official military documentation, and they are thus far more likely to synthesise oral and written sources. Yet, while it is rare to find any academic study which does not include oral evidence in some form, it is equally rare to find one which employs oral testimony as evidence of critical importance for the interpretation where documentary sources are available.

Popular Military History

Another feature of military history, however, is that it holds immense popular interest, and among the popular writers who feed the demand for all things military, attitudes to oral history are anything but reticent; their use of testimony is characterised by an impetuous disregard for the methodological issues. As John Tosh opines:

> Professional historians insist on a lengthy immersion in the primary sources, a deliberate shedding of present-day assumptions, and a rare

[51] Alessandro Portelli, 'Oral History as Genre', in Mary Chamberlain and Paul Thompson (eds.), *Narrative and Genre: Contexts and Types of Communication* (London, 2004), p. 35, cited in Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 30. This is not to suggest that military historians are 'lazy'; only to acknowledge that all research must take account of time and resource limitations.

> degree of empathy and imagination. Popular historical knowledge, on the other hand, tends to a highly reflective interest in the remains of the past, is shot through with present day assumptions, and is only incidentally concerned to understand the past on its own terms.[52]

In 1972 Michael Frisch, concerned that oral testimony seemed to be widely viewed as indistinguishable from fact, noted that oral history 'seem[s] to exhibit self-evident and unequivocal significance. More careful work in most areas, however, quickly shows that the questions to be asked are by no means obvious, the uses of the materials by no means self-evident, and the results to be obtained by no means necessarily meaningful'.[53] Oral historians have since heeded Frisch's concerns and done much to expound the analytical complexity of their sources, but popular military historians continue to display just this tendency: the apparent value of history 'straight from the horse's mouth' is simply too enticing to resist. True, it has long been acknowledged that 'One needs to apply the same care in the evaluation of oral evidence that one must to its written counterpart';[54] however, in practice critical approaches are given lip service but invariably quickly abandoned. Russell Miller's promisingly titled *Nothing Less Than Victory: The Oral History of D-Day*, for instance, claims to tell 'the authentic story of D-Day as it has never been told before—entirely by those who took part, on both sides', yet belies its title by apparently failing to deploy any sort of oral history methodology whatsoever to determine which of the included accounts—some of which are written rather than oral—tell the 'authentic story'.[55]

[52] John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, Fifth Edition (Harlow, 2010), p. 13.
[53] Michael Frisch, 'Oral History and *Hard Times*: A Review Essay', in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds.), *Oral History Reader*, First Edition (London, 1998), p. 36.
[54] Richard Holmes, *Acts of War: The Behaviour of Men in Battle* (New York, 1985), p. 10.
[55] Russell Miller, *Nothing Less than Victory: The Oral History of D-Day* (London, 1993), p. xiii.

The infuriating aspect of this methodological imprecision is not that it often results in incorrect judgements, but that these historians are so often correct for the wrong reasons. Popular historians recognise the individual's inability to observe the big picture,[56] the tendency to play up positive actions and downplay embarrassing ones,[57] and the fact that oral testimony's most unique feature is what it tells us about feelings and emotions.[58] It is well understood that the researcher has a vital role to play in eliciting oral testimony, the process known by oral historians as 'intersubjectivity', and that experience, practice, and background knowledge all help the interviewer to elicit useful testimony: Miller's point that 'with time it was possible to break through the barriers of natural modesty and reserve and gently tap the reservoir of rarely aired inner reminiscences' would be familiar to most with interviewing experience.[59] They note too that, as important life events, war experiences are well remembered: Martin Middlebrook acknowledges in *The Kaiser's Battle* that 'The sceptical reader will, with some justification, query the value of old men's memories. But it was a day that most of the survivors would never forget.'[60] Yet rarely is evidence provided to support these beliefs; given the flimsiness of these historians' methodologies, such assertions appear more likely to be the result of blind optimism than considered epistemological deliberation.

[56] Ibid., p. xiii; Hugh McManners, *The Scars of War* (London, 1993), p. 8.
[57] Middlebrook, *The Kaiser's Battle: 21 March 1918, The First Day of the German Spring Offensive* (London, 1978), p. 11.
[58] Ibid., pp. 9, 12; Miller, *The Oral History of D-Day*, p. xiv.
[59] Miller, *The Oral History of D-Day*, p. xv.
[60] Middlebrook, *The Kaiser's Battle*, p. 11. It is perhaps notable that Middlebrook devotes scant attention to methodology in his first work, *The First Day on the Somme: 1 July 1916* (London, 1971), but is more forthcoming in his later works.

The reluctance of popular writers to grapple with methodology can lead to questionable ideas. Take, for example, Middlebrook's belief that his interviewing experience gave an edge in determining the *truthfulness* of testimony—that there is a 'sixth sense that one develops on reading so many accounts or after so many hours' interviewing; this soon tells when a man is going astray'.[61] Middlebrook did, to his credit, employ more conventional methods, establishing a framework of official written accounts against which to compare the testimony he collected; if any inconsistencies were found within an individual's account or between it and Middlebrook's established historical framework, no other part of it was used. But he neglected to record his interviews, claiming that a tape-recorder would inhibit the testimony, thereby ensuring that his quotes are unverifiable and precluding any chance of narrative or linguistic analysis; this would be regarded as a fatal flaw to any modern piece of oral history.[62] Similarly, Hugh McManners claims that 'As a combat veteran myself...I was able to ask the right questions and avoid the stupid ones that would cause the shutters to come down abruptly. (I was also able to identify and challenge when, on a very few occasions, I was spun a yarn, or when something unpleasant was glossed over).'[63] Personal experience is useful, but it is scarcely an adequate substitute for external corroboration and tried-and-tested theory. Popular military historians generally either base their methodologies on intuition and the vague benefits of experience, or use hidden methodologies which they are reluctant to acknowledge—given the theoretical

[61] Middlebrook, *The Kaiser's Battle*, p. 11; Middlebrook, *The Argentine Fight for the Falklands* (Barnsley, 1989), p. ix.
[62] Martin Middlebrook, *The Kaiser's Battle*, pp. 10-11; Martin Middlebrook, 'An Interview with Martin Middlebrook: Reflections on Fifty Years of Researching and Writing on the First World War', Public Lecture, University of Kent, 14th October 2015.
[63] McManners, *Scars of War*, p. 1.

tools provided by the oral history field, neither of these approaches can be condoned as sufficiently rigorous. Some even relinquish the attempt entirely. Russell Miller admits that 'I took all their accounts on trust; if memories are faulty or time has embroidered reality, so be it. They were indisputably there, and that was enough for me'.[64]

Sometimes historians are more concerned with amassing a wealth of testimony—admittedly a considerable enough task on its own—than verifying it as factually accurate. Lyn Macdonald falls victim to this pitfall when recounting the testimony of Fred Beadle, who witnessed the charge of the Deccan Horse and 7th Dragoon Guards at High Wood on the Somme on 14 July 1916:

> It was an incredible sight, an unbelievable sight, they galloped up with their lances and with pennants flying up the slope to High Wood and straight into it. Of course they were falling all the way…I've never seen anything like it! They simply galloped on through all that and horses and men dropping on the ground, with no hope against the machine-guns…It was an absolute rout. A magnificent sight. Tragic.[65]

Richard Holmes has conclusively refuted this account, pointing out that it is clear that Beadle embellished his account with elements the audience would expect to hear—the cavalry charge dramatically *into* the wood, not up to the edge of it as they really did; they carry pennants, which were not actually flown in battle; and they flounder against the killing power of the machine-gun, something of a cliché in popular representations of the First World War. Holmes concludes that 'it is perfectly clear that the cavalry killed more, probably many more, of the enemy than the enemy killed of it'—the charge was certainly not a massacre—and thus 'this vivid and compelling

[64] Miller, *Nothing Less than Victory*, p. xv.
[65] Lyn Macdonald, *Somme* (London, 1984), pp. 137-8.

quotation illustrates the dangers of relying on uncorroborated oral history. Although Second Lieutenant Beadle tells us precisely what we expect to hear, it is something that did not actually take place'. [66] It also illustrates the problems that arise when expansive oral history projects outstrip the ability or inclination of researchers to corroborate the testimony they reproduce. This particular example is one of the better-known, but it cannot be reasonably assumed that it is unique.

The presentation of testimony in this sort of history is often deeply problematic too. The belief in eyewitness evidence as direct evidence of historical reality is regularly taken to preclude the necessity for contextualisation and analysis. The result is anthologies of personal accounts in the most literal sense, with extracts reproduced in succession with no semblance of establishing context or attempting analysis—'what John Keegan calls "the historian as copy-typist", when there is little attempt to do more than collate personal accounts and string them together with bluff assertions that the evidence speaks for itself'.[67] Sometimes this results in what Paul Budra calls the "exemplary mode", 'the collection of short, illustrative non-fiction examples into compendia…the exemplary mode uses short, usually historical narratives to illustrate a *sententia* or moral, often concatenating many…exempla to prove the point…It is aggregative rather than analytic.'[68] By breaking interviews up and rearranging them along thematic lines, this approach aims to present a collective, anonymous experience; it can also encourage the 'emphasis on orality, on passive attendance to memory rather than analytic engagement with history' familiar from oral history

[66] Richard Holmes, *Tommy: The British Soldier on the Western Front*, *1914-1918* (London, 2004), pp. 440-1.
[67] Richard Holmes, *Acts of War*, p. 11.
[68] Budra, 'Concatenation and History in *Nam*', in Budra and Zeitlin, *Soldier Talk*, p. 54.

work.[69] In other instances, even illustrating broad generalisations is not attempted. The well-known *Forgotten Voices* series falls into this category; these books are undeniably interesting, and successful as an exercise in public history for having brought the Imperial War Museum's holdings to a wider audience, but the general absence of contextualisation prevents anything that might be called a historical interpretation being derived from the interviews. Moreover, the purported absence of the researcher in this approach—encapsulated in Max Arthur's claim that 'These are their words—I have been but a catalyst'[70]—may with great justification be seen as intellectually dishonest, as Donald Ritchie points out:

> The very act of editing and arranging interviews shows that the author has not simply allowed interviewees to speak for themselves…Even if the editor refrains from adding an overt interpretation, he or she is still deciding which interviews are most worthy of being recorded and published. Having gone that far then, the editor owes something more to readers.[71]

Such 'collages' lack contextualisation and interpretation and as a result can no more be considered useful oral history than anthologies of treaties can be considered useful diplomatic history.

An additional problem is that the research aims of academic and popular military historians tend to differ from those of oral historians. John Tosh has pointed out that there are two possible ways to plan historical projects: one which allows the focus to be determined by the sources and the information they contain, and one which asks pre-determined questions and aims to answer them using any sources which are

[69] Ibid., pp. 54, 59; Portelli, 'Oral History as Genre', in Chamberlain and Thompson (eds.), *Narrative and Genre*, p. 35.
[70] Max Arthur, *Forgotten Voices of the Great War* (London, 2002), p. xii.
[71] Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, p. 131.

relevant.[72] In practice most studies fall somewhere in between, but oral historians evidently tend towards the former, and military historians towards the latter. Oral history projects usually involve collecting testimonies from a particular group—ideally one which has been marginalised in society and neglected by historians, in line with oral history's 'recovery' role—and reporting the results.[73] In the highly contested territory of military history, by contrast, the historiographical battle-lines are usually well-defined, but the types of source historians draw upon are not. This accounts for the willingness of military historians to use oral history, but, paradoxically, also explains why they do not explore its methodological ramifications in depth. Interviewing techniques differ along similar lines: oral historians usually conduct 'life story' interviews—'full-scale autobiographical accounts that allow interviewees to relate their entire life'[74]—whereas interviews for military history projects tend to focus on the short period of their life the interviewee spent at war. The broadness of the life story approach means that when applied to military history it often fails to develop any particular area of the historiography; conversely, more focussed interviewing will tend to iron out much of the wider context of the interviewee's life which is essential for understanding oral testimony.[75]

There are thus clear ideological, methodological and practical reasons why oral history and military history remain largely distinct fields. If oral historians have validated their field by shifting their focus onto subjectivity, this has failed to ensure that oral sources are recognised as a legitimate form of evidence in mainstream academic history, and

[72] Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, pp. 120-2.
[73] Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 29.
[74] Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, p. 27.
[75] James, *Doña Maria's Story*, p. 124; Holstein and Gubrium, *The Active Interview*, pp. 76-7.

had little influence on the non-experts who actually make most use of oral sources for the interpretative objectives which are the fundamental goal of history. These problems are, however, far from insurmountable, and it is entirely conceivable that historians of war can take account of both the theoretical achievements of oral history as well as the historiographical context provided by military history. This study advocates for a return to the empirical research objectives which have fallen by the wayside during oral history's realignment. Ultimately, 'the world is knowable...however feeble our current efforts, it is possible to improve the reliability of our knowledge of the world and even to recognize improvements in that knowledge.'[76] Oral history may have shifted towards embracing rather than overcoming subjectivity, but this in itself is does not prove that distortions arising from subjectivity are impossible to evaluate and account for, and Paul Thompson is correct to argue that 'Through all these new approaches we need to keep always in mind our ultimate objective, which is to use personal memory...to interpret change over time.'[77] Once oral sources are analysed in the correct manner, they yield information which is no more subjectively biased than that provided by letters, written memoirs, or official documents; this evidence can be employed in interpretations of past history, not just contemporary subjectivity.

Approaching the Interviews

The material for this study is a collection of thirty-three interviews conducted by Matthew Lucas and held by the University of Wolverhampton. Although this may appear a rather threadbare primary source base compared to many works of military

[76] Tilly, 'People's History and Social Science History', pp. 462-3. See also Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, pp. viii-ix; de Lee, 'Oral History', in Addison and Calder (eds.), *Time to Kill*, pp. 361, 365.
[77] Thompson, 'Believe it or not', in Jeffrey and Edwall (eds.), *Memory and History*, p. 11.

history, it is not unusual in oral history to see articles based on a single interview, and full-length comparative works using twenty to thirty. For his well-regarded study of Anzac memory Alastair Thomson talked to twenty-one veterans, but much of his analysis focussed on only three.[78] This standard is a consequence of the labour-intensive nature of conducting and handling interviews, the large amount of information contained in even a relatively short interview, and the extreme depth of analysis expected in modern oral history practice. Most of the interviews used in this study last around ninety minutes; the shortest is just shy of fourteen minutes, the longest almost ten hours. In all, over 58 hours of audio were analysed.

All of the interviewees served in the British Army during the Second World War and were involved in 'the campaign to victory' between D-Day on 6th June 1944 and the German surrender on 5th May 1945. The interviews were conducted between 2011 and 2013. Although sometimes divided into multiple recording sessions, all but one of the interviews were recorded in the course of one day. They took place in the veterans' homes, or in some cases in retirement homes. All lived in central and southern England, with the Wiltshire, Worcestershire and Somerset Regiments being particularly well represented due to connections between members of their regimental associations. Due to this selection bias the testimony is focussed on certain operations, such as EPSOM, JUPITER and BLUECOAT during the Battle of Normandy, and NEPTUNE, the crossing of the Seine at Vernon in August 1944.

[78] Thomson, *Anzac Memories*.

Reflecting the balance of fighting troops in the army itself, most were infantrymen; seven were tank crewmen, two each were engineers, medics and glider pilots, and one was a paratrooper. The only major 'teeth' arm not represented is the Royal Artillery.[79] Almost all were (or at least perceived themselves as being) under some degree of danger, ranging from sporadic long-range artillery or air attack to intense close-range combat. There are a range of private soldiers, NCOs, officers, and some who served as all three. Therefore, the interviewees represent a broad, if not proportional, cross-section of the fighting personnel involved in the campaign. They are not representative of the British Army as a whole due to the high number of men who served in logistical and support units, who are not widely represented here. Popular and academic focus has tended to be on combatants, both due to the evident importance of the fighting itself, and the prestige invested in combatants due to discourses around veterans, issues which will be discussed throughout the thesis. The interviewees are also unrepresentative of the Army as a whole because they were deployed to Northwest Europe, and their experiences were therefore substantially different to those who fought in North Africa and the Far East earlier in the war or in Italy and Burma in 1944-5. Aside from the obvious differences in the terrain over which the fighting took place, most of the troops who opened the 'Second Front' had been retained in England to prepare.[80] Most of the interviewees were therefore

[79] An interview conducted shortly after the completion of this research with Victor Syborn, formerly of 5 Royal Horse Artillery, suggests that even their relatively short remove from the front line provided a high degree of insulation from the violence of combat as experienced up close by infantrymen and tankers; there is substantial scope here for further research.

[80] J. A. Crang, 'The British Soldier on the Home Front: Army Morale Reports, 1940-45', in Addison and Calder (eds.), *Time to Kill*, p. 60; Alan Allport, *Browned Off and Bloody-Minded: The British Soldier Goes to War, 1939-1945* (New Haven, 2015), p. 181.

younger men who were conscripted in 1941 or 1942 and who had not seen any active service before they arrived in Normandy, although there are some exceptions.

The interviews were not conducted by the current writer. Arguably there is something of a stigma attached to using archived interviews, somewhat contradictory to the principle of oral history serving as an enduring record of life experience. Oral historians usually prefer to conduct their own interviews for practical reasons too, as this allows them to direct the questioning according to their research focus. However, using archived interviews need not be a disadvantage. The historian can be sure that their own preconceptions have not influenced the testimony—relevant themes 'emerge within the interview outside of any specific prompting from the framing of questions by the interviewers'[81]—and if distortions are bound to emerge in some form, it ought to be easier to impartially assess the influence of another's interview technique than one's own.

Additionally, the interviews were not transcribed in full, and instead were handled in audio form using a computer program called Stories Matter.[82] Whereas full transcription obliterates the source's orality—'the shape and rhythm of the speech act'[83]—usually before any analysis takes place, this program fulfils many of the organisational functions of a transcript while maintaining the orality of the source. Here, instead, the interviews were analysed in their original oral form, and only once certain extracts were selected for quotation did transcription take place. It has been

[81] Tim Cole, '(Re)Placing the Past: Spatial Strategies of Retelling Difficult Stories', *The Oral History Review*, 42/1 (2015), p. 33.
[82] Stories Matter website, <http://storytelling.concordia.ca/storiesmatter/> [accessed September 2017].
[83] Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 19.

widely noted that mass digitalisation has the potential to restore the orality of oral sources, and a better understanding of orality is likely to be one of the next big developments in oral history;[84] this study therefore aims to take full advantage of analysing the original audio.

The term interviewee has been used throughout, as analogous to alternative terms such as 'narrator', 'respondent' and 'informant'. These alternatives purport to rectify unequal power dynamics in the interview, whereby 'interviewee' is seen to imply an inferior, passive role compared with the interviewer.[85] However, while acknowledging that an unequal balance of power can be problematic, 'interviewee' does accurately reflect the situation in which the testimony was elicited, as the veterans were questioned, rather than proffering their opinions on their own initiative, and therefore did take up a reactive position in the interviews; however, the term is in no way intended to imply a lesser status for the veterans, and indeed any such concerns are belied by the style of interviewing.

The interviews were conducted according to the 'life story' approach, which permits the interviewee as much freedom as possible to dictate the topics under discussion. As Donald Ritchie argues, 'Broader questioning establishes links that neither the interviewer nor the interviewee may have considered in a more narrowly focused interview session.'[86] This openness is necessary to allow the interviewee freedom to

[84] Alistair Thomson and Robert Perks, 'Transformations in Oral History Theory and Practice: Editing the Oral History Reader over Two Decades', Public Lecture, Institute of Historical Research, London, 14th December 2015; Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, p. 52.
[85] Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 176.
[86] Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, p. 27. See also Charlotte Linde, *Life Stories: The Creation of Coherence* (Oxford, 1993); Holstein and Gubrium, *The Active Interview*.

relate their testimony in relation to their entire life course and their sense of self; there is also some evidence that forceful questioning can disrupt the (usually chronological) organisation of testimony and result in a loss of information.[87] The downside is that opportunities to take a more interrogative stance, and delve deeper into particular parts of an interviewee's account, like a key battle, are more limited. The ideal project structure, especially when researching a specific event, is probably to begin with an unstructured life story interview and, having analysed it, return on a later occasion for a more probing, interrogative interview; however, only the former has been possible here. The testimony is richly informative nonetheless. Most interviews begin with the question 'How did you come to join the army in the first place?', and continue from that point in a broadly chronological progression through the veteran's time in the army. Few require more than infrequent prompting to move the interview forward. Questions are open-ended and do not lead the interviewer towards particular responses. The interviews cover the same core themes such as training, combat experience, and encounters with civilians and the enemy, whether on the interviewee's own initiative or due to questioning, so there is a great deal of readily comparable information.

In this thesis, interview extracts are interlinked with analysis. The focus is not on presenting a narrative, or simply telling the interviewees' stories, interesting as they are. The aim is to use their recollections to make broader points about the British Army in 1944-5, its characteristics as an institution, and the experiences of the men

[87] Alice M. Hoffman and Howard S. Hoffman, 'Reliability and Validity in Oral History: The Case for Memory', in Jeffrey and Edwall (eds.), *Memory and History*, pp. 120-1, 126.

who fought in it. The study is an analytical one, and the analysis is informed by the testimony, but the testimony does not dictate the themes or the structure of the study, as has so often been the case elsewhere. Many of the interviewees provide information that is beyond the broad remit of this study but would be of value in specialist histories: for example, Edwin Hunt's memories of planning amphibious operations at Second Army Headquarters, Ray Gordon's description of 1940s burn treatments, Ian Hammerton's recollections of developing equipment and doctrine for flail tanks, Reg Spittles' explanation of tank commanders' procedures for using map and radio, Stan Procter's discussion of signalling procedures, and Bill Edwardes' in-depth accounts of stretcher-bearing.[88] However these lie outside the limits of this study and are therefore not discussed at length.

The practical matter of presenting the testimony must be addressed, given the laxity with which this is usually approached. Spoken language rarely resembles written language, and therefore transcription is always a compromise to permit readability while preserving the orality of the spoken testimony. Military histories often 'tidy up' oral quotes to the extent that they appear as neatly composed as written language, and even in oral history this is advocated; Linda Shopes recommends a heavy process of editing including rearranging sections, cutting extraneous information, splicing words and phrases to aid comprehension, and inserting words that go unspoken without indicating such additions have been made.[89] Although she rightly stresses that the process is a balancing act to ensure readability while maintaining the unique voice

[88] Hunt, 2, 05-07, 3, 00-39; Gordon, 3, 11-28; Hammerton, 1, 29-33; Spittles, 3, 03-11; Procter, 1, 08-09, 14, 19-21; Edwardes, 1, 10-12, 16-20, 37-38, 41-46, 74-80.
[89] Linda Shopes, 'Editing Oral History for Publication', in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds.), *Oral History Reader*, Third Edition (Abingdon, 2016), pp. 470-9.

of the speaker, this seems altogether too heavy-handed an approach. Moreover, for Shopes editing has an interpretative role, allowing the speaker's 'hierarchy of thought' to be explicated: 'paradoxically, literal fidelity to the spoken word—or the transcript of the spoken word—can betray meaning, can obscure rather than clarify what the narrator is trying to get at, as she meanders or thrashes around, misspeaks, says things that make sense when spoken but lose meaning when rendered in print… Not to rework the transcript, often radically, can inadvertently render a narrator inarticulate in print.'[90] Yet it appears highly condescending to rework the transcript to present what the researcher thinks the interviewee is trying to say—they are quite capable of explaining their point in the words they choose, while the reader is quite capable of understanding it. In a study such as this one, where testimony is not expected to stand on its own but is bracketed by analysis of its meaning and relevance, there seems no need for heavy editing—it is better to give the reader an accurate impression of the source being used, and explain any ambiguity in the accompanying analysis, than to alter what the interviewee is purported to have said. Accurate reproduction of transcriptions is also an important element of academic rigour; editing too liberally can easily distort and misrepresent the source in a way which is invisible to the reader, and such an approach seems altogether too reminiscent of the problematic methods seen in works such as the *Forgotten Voices* series.

Heavy editing has therefore been avoided here; quotes are rendered readable but otherwise represent the spoken words as closely as possible. Information such as long pauses, which can provide useful indications of the speaker's thought processes, has

[90] Ibid., pp. 476-477.

not been removed. Wording has not been altered for grammatical correctness. While most speech is rendered in standard British English spelling, common shortenings like "cos' are retained because this reflects the speech. Long continuous sentences have been allowed to run on, so that a comma indicates a slight pause for breath and a full stop indicates a longer, deliberate pause. Only common filler words—*um*s and *er*s, for example—have been removed. Such words, as well as unexpected or out-of-place pauses which often indicate contemplation or difficulty finding an appropriate phrase, are represented by ellipses; where these last for longer than three seconds the approximate duration of the pause in seconds is shown in square brackets. Inaudible speech is indicated in square brackets, along with the duration if longer than three seconds. Ellipses at the beginning or end of a quote indicate speech that runs on without stopping. Sudden digressions or self-interruptions without a pause are represented by dashes, and stressed words in italics. A word that goes unspoken or is swallowed, but is necessary for written comprehension, is included in square brackets. An ellipsis in square brackets indicates that part of a quote has been excluded, although wherever possible I have tried to avoid dividing the testimony up into quotable 'sound-bites' and instead kept longer sections together even where they cover diverse themes. This causes some difficulties for well-structured historical writing but serves to preserve the interviewee's meaning and thought processes by not falsely dissociating ideas which are linked in the original testimony. Wherever relevant the questions are also quoted, in order to add context to the subsequent statements; where this is done, the words of each speaker are indicated by their initials.

Oral extracts must also be rigorously cited, even though, as already noted, this practice is curiously uncommon even in academia. In the text, interviewees are referred to by the names, sometimes shortened, that they were happy with being used in the interview. In the footnotes, the system used here provides the surname of the interviewee, the recording session (in single digits), and the location of the extract in the recording (in double or triple digits). The location of the extract is the time displayed when the recording is played; therefore the first minute of an interview is '00', the second is '01', and the twenty-first is '20'. The bibliography lists the name of each interviewee, their former regiment(s), the date of the interview, the number of recording sessions and the total length of the interview.

Thesis Structure

Chapter One will discuss the issues around the reliability and validity of oral testimony, and its value as a source of evidence compared with other typical categories of source. Once the basic reliability of oral history is established, the testimony is analysed in terms of what is here termed 'retrospective subjectivity', which describes those subjective distortions which take place at the time of the telling (as opposed to 'historical subjectivity' which refers to perceptions at the time of the event). The Second World War represents perhaps the defining experience of the British nation in the twentieth century, and is invested with historical and cultural significance even for those living today who did not personally experience it. Likewise, D-Day is recognised as a crucial turning-point in the war, a landmark victory which paved the way for the capitulation of Nazi Germany. Meanwhile conceptions of soldiering and war experience have shifted over time. It has long been recognised that such shared meanings,

'popular discourses' as they are referred to here, are influential on oral testimony, and Chapter Two therefore explores the discourses likely to have influenced the interviews. Chapters Three and Four explore the narrative techniques used in the interviews, comparing the importance of popular memory and individual remembering on the process of 'composure' by which interviewees prepare a narrative of their lives which they are happy to relate. Chapter Five tackles an inescapable feature of military accounts, trauma, and asks how the lasting psychological effects of war service can be understood to influence testimony. These chapters thus lay the groundwork for the interpretative application of the testimony to more conventional military historical issues around the British Army and the 1944-5 campaign. To this end, Chapter Six assesses combat experience and morale, while Chapter Seven deals with doctrine and battlefield conduct.

This structure may attract criticism as it suggests that the subjective influences on testimony can be dealt with separately from the historical interpretation. It requires some ground to be trodden more than once. Doubtless many oral historians would argue that these issues should be dealt with as a whole, that the subjective cannot be separated from the substantive. Yet the argument presented here is that such an approach has led directly to the current malaise of the unproductive and circular focus on interpreting subjectivity and developing theory, because this is often easier and more convenient. Retrospective subjectivity *can* be separated from useful historical evidence, however problematic and incomplete this process might be. Only then can the true promise of oral history be fulfilled, as it is employed as a different but equally potent source in the work of interpreting military history.

Chapter 1
Reliability and Validity: Assessing the Veracity of Veterans' Testimony

This chapter will deal with the basic difficulties of employing veterans' oral history as a historical source. The veracity of oral evidence has frequently been brought into question, but this issue has been treated by military historians with a singular lack of nuance. The usual lack of methodological clarity is in evidence here—disapproval of oral sources is evident only from their omission, and examinations of the problems they pose are few and far between. However, virtually any actual mention of oral sources is accompanied by an acknowledgement of their deficiencies, which are apparently so plain as not to require any sort of detailed exploration. Robert Engen, for instance, asserts that, because memory is fallible, 'interviews with soldiers carried out years or decades after the fact are of questionable value', but does not elaborate.[91] Even defenders of oral history have tended to take its unreliability as a given, and champion it *in spite of* its apparent deficiencies, rather than examining whether or not these characteristics are really so problematic, or unpacking precisely in what ways testimony is or is not reliable.[92] Mostly they labour the correct but basic point that testimony contains a great deal of valuable information, and neglect to delve much deeper than this; therefore some questionable judgements are in evidence. For instance, several assessments published in the 1990s make much of the *vividness* of oral testimony: Peter Liddle and Matthew Richardson cite the 'remarkable level of detail with which some men and women can recall events of sixty or seventy years

[91] Engen, *Canadians Under Fire*, p. 32.
[92] Simkins, 'Everyman at War', in Bond (ed.), *The First World War and British Military History*, p. 292.

ago'; Peter Simkins contends that 'Men can clearly recall going into battle for the first time, being wounded, or seeing a close comrade die beside them'; and Russell Miller opines that 'It is extraordinary, given the passing of the years, how well the events of [D-Day] are remembered by the men who were there. Some can recall, almost minute-by-minute, what happened, even to the extent of relating, word-for-word, exchanges under fire to their mates'.[93] However, vividness does not itself indicate accuracy, and there is no reason given why these stories should be seen as fact rather than engaging fiction; these historians ultimately do not demonstrate that oral testimony is veridical. They may be partially excused this omission given the relative obscurity and scarcity of accessible oral history research in the 1990s, but unfortunately no equivalent studies have appeared to correct this deficiency, even though theoretical understandings of oral testimony have since developed greatly.[94] These have laid out good reasons to believe in the usefulness of oral evidence in memory studies, but the consequences for historical research have rarely been explored due to the focus on subjectivity, which absolves researchers of producing conventional historical interpretations.

What all these approaches lack is considered assessment of the various factors which affect oral sources' veridical worth—even though this is quite possible to do. This chapter aims to consider the different criteria of oral testimony's usefulness, which are

[93] Liddle and Richardson, 'Voices from the Past', p. 653; Simkins, 'Everyman at War', in Bond (ed.), *The First World War and British Military History*, p. 292; Miller, *The Oral History of D-Day*, p. xiv.
[94] There is apparently still a reluctance to embrace oral history theory in military research. One recent assessment claims that 'The purpose of interviewing for oral history is to present an unadulterated view of respondents, without the researcher's interpretation'—an opinion with which few oral historians would agree. Brenda L. Moore, 'In-Depth Interviewing', in Soeters, Shields, and Rietjens (eds.), *Research Methods in Military Studies*, p. 124.

rarely distinguished from one another, and add some clarity to issues which have become muddled and confused. By establishing the basic worth of oral testimony as a source which constitutes a reliable record, this is a vital preliminary to the rest of the thesis, which will explore in more depth the particular analytical tools necessary and the historical usefulness of oral testimony.

An approach outlined by Alice Hoffmann is a useful one here. As she notes, the ultimate goal of history is to create an interpretation of the past which is as close to what really happened as possible; however, because there is no 'true' record of the past against which interpretations can be tested, the process is always an indirect one, reliant on the remnants which are left, the sources. The veracity of a source can best be measured by how it fulfils two criteria: 'reliability' and 'validity'. Neither criterion measures the truthfulness of a source *per se*.[95]

Reliability is simply a measure of the internal consistency of a source over time, or the ability of the same research processes to obtain the same results. 'An oral history informant is reliable if his or her reports of a given event are consistent with each other',[96] whereas if an interviewee contradicts himself in the course of an interview, or tells a different tale each time he is interviewed, his testimony is unreliable, and this brings its meaning into doubt. Here reliability is an attribute of the *testimony*, not the interpretation of the researcher, as has been suggested by some[97]—an account

[95] Alice Hoffman, 'The Case for Memory', in Dunaway and Baum (eds.), *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, pp. 87-93.
[96] Ibid., p. 89.
[97] Eyan Ben-Ari, 'Reflexivity', in Soeters, Shields and Rietjens (eds.), *Research Methods in Military Studies*, p. 34.

might be subject to multiple interpretations as to its meaning, but there can only be minor disagreement over the interviewee's words as they are recorded or transcribed.

Validity, by contrast, means the level of similarity with other sources. 'An informant can be reliable (the same story emerges each time it is called for), but the story may or may not be a valid representation of the original events as judged by comparison with other sources.'[98] One source may be anomalous, but many sources which concur with each other indicate commonplace happenings. When applied to subjectivity the question of validity becomes somewhat more complex, as even descriptions of uncorroborated events can reveal attitudes and opinions which were widely shared, but the principle is the same. Reliability and validity provide a basis for teasing out the precise problems posed by veterans' testimony. Although not all of the interviews used in this study can be verified in this way—this would require repeat interviews over an extended period of time—it is fair to assume that the findings of oral history theorists can be applied. The possible criticisms of oral history—which the above-quoted examples singularly fail to distinguish from one another—really comprise three main problems: the limitations of human perception; the fallibility of memory; and the (in)ability to narrative a coherent story. These will be considered in turn.

The Limits of Perception

Oral sources are not comprehensive. This is true of all sources, but particularly apparent in those which depend on nothing more than eyewitness experience. If this is a difference of degree, not in kind, it is recognisably a particularly large degree.

[98] Hoffman, 'Reliability and Validity', in Dunaway and Baum (eds.), *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, p. 90.

Whereas the author of a report on military operations would, it is presumed, make some effort to corroborate their assessment with whatever evidence of the broad situation they are able to obtain from discussions with the relevant personnel or reference to other reports, oral evidence is for the most part restricted by the bounds of personal perception. True, oral testimony can certainly contain assessments of broader events, but such knowledge will probably be retrospective and should be treated with a great deal of scepticism.[99] Ultimately not every part of an event is witnessed by participants, and not everything witnessed is remembered. Experience, seniority, rank and the tactical role of the individual soldier in the operation will all influence his recollections of it.[100] Throughout the interviews it is apparent that officers comment at much more length about the condition and morale of the men they commanded than those same men do: this reflects the officers' concerns at the time. Hugh McManners also points out that 'For the individual, war is a very parochial, localised experience, almost impossible to relate to a battle or campaign as a whole'.[101] An individual who spent a battle looking at the inside of a slit trench simply will not have much knowledge of the wider events they were involved in.

The interpretative ramifications of this will be discussed in later chapters, but here it is necessary to note that the limitations of human perception have no bearing on reliability, because it only limits the scope of oral accounts, not their consistency over

[99] As oral evidence is collected mainly to reveal personal experience, historians would do well to disregard testimony which really constitutes historical interpretation, unless, of course, where it illustrates individual subjectivity. Victor Gregg is particularly demonstrative of this: his judgements about Market-Garden tell us little about the operation but a great deal about his disdain for the high command and belief in his own authority as a commentator. See Gregg, 2, 58-60.
[100] McManners, *Scars of War*, p. 136.
[101] Ibid., p. 8; Holmes, *Acts of War*, p. 10; de Lee, 'Oral History', in Addison and Calder (eds.), *Time to Kill*, p. 365; Fred H. Allison, 'Remembering a Vietnam War Firefight: Changing Perspectives over Time', *The Oral History Review*, 31/2 (Summer-Autumn, 2004), p. 81.

time. It may have an impact on validity, if an account is so specific and focussed that it cannot be corroborated by other sources. However, this is not generally the case, particularly after the explosion of war experience work since the 1970s and the great variety of precise military studies which exist. That oral sources are never comprehensive is simply a basic limitation which must be recognised by historians who wish to use them.

The Fallibility of Memory

Once an event has been witnessed, the issue of memory arises—can one trust people's recollections of events which occurred many decades ago? This is the most obvious problem with oral evidence, and probably the one cited most often. Memory presents what Alistair Thomson has called a paradox.[102] Undeniably, memory is highly vulnerable to distortion. Rather than representing an exact record, not all that is witnessed is 'encoded' into memory.[103] Moreover memories are actively reconstructed each time they are recalled; during this process, new information is combined with the 'original' memory.[104] In spite of this, evidence shows that memory is extremely reliable, and 'our memory systems do a remarkably good job of preserving the general contours of our pasts and of recording correctly many of the important things that have happened to us'.[105] To explain this paradox, it is necessary to move beyond a

[102] Thomson, '*Anzac Memories* Revisited', p. 26; Thomson, 'Memory and Remembering', in Ritchie (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, p. 90.
[103] Daniel L. Schacter, *Searching for Memory: The Brain, The Mind and the Past* (New York, 1996), pp. 42, 102-4.
[104] Ibid., p. 70; pp. 86-7.
[105] Ibid., p. 308.

one-dimensional understanding of memory, and consider what tends to be well-remembered, and what tends not to be.

Of relevance here is a long-term experiment in the reliability of war memory conducted by Alice Hoffman and her husband Howard, a US Army veteran of the Second World War. Howard was first interviewed about the war in an unstructured 'life story' style, only asked questions for the purposes of clarification and contextualisation. He then spent four years attempting to avoid situations which would cause him to recollect or rehearse his memories of the war. A second round of unstructured interviews was then conducted to test the reliability of his account, while a third attempted to cue memories using references to the documentary record.[106] The overwhelming conclusion of the Hoffmans' research was that Howard's war memories were extremely durable: 'so stable, they are reliable to the point of being set in concrete. They cannot be dislodged. It was virtually impossible to change, to enhance, or to stimulate new memories by any method that we could devise'.[107] Such memories are likely to be deemed particularly important at the time of the event, or soon afterwards; they are also likely to be one-off events or a first occasion of an event which subsequently becomes routine. Memories are organised in an extremely consistent narrative, which in Howard's case was chronological. Forcing Howard to depart from the chronology caused omissions, though 'there seems to be a subset of organization' so that each individual incident was described in the same way whether it was recalled in the course of the narrative or independently cued.[108] The narrative structure was so well-

[106] Hoffman and Hoffman, 'The Case for Memory', in Jeffrey and Edwall (eds.), *Memory and History*, p. 110.
[107] Ibid., p. 124.
[108] Ibid., p. 120-1.

rehearsed that Howard hesitated at the same point during both interviews, and here 'it is interesting to observe that what is stored contains the basis for the interruption as well as the story'.[109] There were some gaps in Howard's account where incidents evidenced by documents and photographs had apparently never been properly encoded, or had been encoded but never properly rehearsed. However, in only one case did Howard's account actually contradict the documentary record.[110]

The Hoffmans' experiment accords with oral history theory in suggesting that veterans are likely to produce an account which contains the most important parts of their war. It has been noted that particularly emotional events are remembered well, and many war experiences certainly fit this criterion.[111] Where experiences are not dramatic enough to stick in the memory in this way, then repetition becomes important, so routines are usually easily recalled compared with one-off events, unless the latter are of particular significance.[112] It therefore seems usually more productive to ask veterans about general procedures than about particular incidents. Where emotional events become routine—such as repeated experiences of combat—the first such event will probably be remembered well, but the specifics of later ones may be lost to memory.[113] That said, the general patterns of experience will be remembered: 'people do not forget an entire set of repeated traumas'.[114]

[109] Ibid., p. 112.
[110] Ibid, pp. 118-24.
[111] Ibid., p. 125; Thomson, 'Memory and Remembering in Oral History', in Ritchie (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, pp. 84-5; Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, pp. 81, 83.
[112] Ibid., p. 87.
[113] Hoffman and Hoffman, 'The Case for Memory', in Jeffrey and Edwall (eds.), *Memory and History*, p. 122; Walton, 'Memories from the Edge of the Abyss', pp. 27-9.
[114] Schacter, *Searching for Memory*, p. 68.

The Second World War was recognised by most at the time as of individual and historical importance, and this primed soldiers to pay attention during their participation and to reconsider the war in its aftermath. As Alessandro Portelli points out, 'it is hard to keep any (male) informant from expounding about what he did in the war (or in the service). War embodies history in the most obvious school book sense of the word; having been in the war is the most immediately tangible claim for having been in history'.[115] The result—and the answer to the paradox of oral history—is that most veterans rehearse, fairly soon after the event, a workable account which can be deployed at will when required; this inevitably omits much information, but contains what the individual deems sufficiently important, and is generally extremely durable.[116]

While it is true that influences like popular memory and intersubjectivity cause stories to be constantly re-composed and ensure no two oral retellings are the same, it is also the case that most accounts will have a core narrative and thematic structure which is durable and consistent over the long-term. Comparing multiple interviews conducted sometimes years apart,[117] as well as comparing interviews with written memoirs,[118] makes this quite apparent. Bill Nasson describes how 're-interviewing over several

[115] Portelli, 'Oral History as Genre', in Chamberlain and Thompson (eds.), *Narrative and Genre*, pp. 26-7.
[116] Hoffman and Hoffman, 'The Case for Memory', in Jeffrey and Edwall (eds.), *Memory and History*, p. 125.
[117] Imperial War Museum Sound Archive (IWM) 21626, Ekins, Joseph William; IWM 8939, Hammerton, Ian; IWM 22925, Majendie, John Dering; IWM 22499, Procter, Stanley Cyril; IWM 16808, Spittles, Reginald; IWM 21286, Tout, Kenneth.
[118] S. C. Procter, *A Quiet Little Boy Goes to War*, IWM Documents 5636 1996/09/24; Hammerton, Ian, *Achtung! Minen!: The Making of a Flail Tank Trooper* (London, 1991); Gregg, Victor, *Rifleman: A Front Line Life from Alamein and Dresden to the Fall of the Berlin Wall* (London, 2011); 'Private Luis DiMarco', *The Pegasus Archive*, <http://www.pegasusarchive.org/arnhem/luis_dimarco.htm> [accessed February 2018].

days, probing the same ground and checking incidental detail, produced stories and memories of events characterised by astonishingly consistent and precise construction. There was almost no descriptive variation across a number of repeated versions'.[119] This tendency has been widely identified as problematic, perhaps most memorably by Richard Holmes:

> Sometimes survivors played their roles too well: they became Veterans, General Issue, neatly packed with what we wanted to hear, exploding at the touch of a tape-recorder button or the snap of a TV documentarist's clapper-board. Up to my neck in muck and bullets; rats as big as footballs; the sergeant major was a right bastard; all my mates were killed. And sometimes, just sometimes, they tell us this because they have heard it themselves.[120]

Certainly, an analyst should be aware of the possibility that a story is a well-worn work of fiction—*over*-rehearsed. Some of the interviews demonstrate this tendency to a small extent.[121] Rehearsal is, however, by no means always a disadvantage; some prior contemplation is vital for any useful piece of testimony. If researchers desire accounts which are reliable, then this requires rehearsal—a non-rehearsed account might appear at first glance more 'natural' but if an interviewee includes whatever comes to mind at that particular moment without any sort of consistent thematic organisation this may result in stories which change with each telling, and are more susceptible to external influences at the time of the telling. Rehearsal ensures an account is more reflective of the individual's view, and makes a point; interviews are conducted precisely because they elicit such thoughtful and reflective accounts. It is

[119] Nasson, 'Springbok on the Somme', p. 37. Nasson's analysis of this is in a sense flawed, however: he assumes that consistency over a few days can be extrapolated to indicate consistency over many years, but this is not necessarily the case.
[120] Holmes, *Tommy*, p. xxiii. See also A.J.P. Taylor's assessment in Harrison, 'Oral History and Recent Political History', p. 46; Hew Strachan, 'Into History', *RUSI Journal*, 154/4 (2009), pp. 4-5.
[121] See Hammerton, 1, 99-100; Spittles, 5, 54-56; Gregg, 2, 58-60; Young, 1, 62-63.

only with the passage of time that a participant can consider what an event *meant*, something Fred H. Allison remarks upon. He compared two interviews about a Vietnam veteran's combat action, one conducted immediately after the combat in 1968, and one in 2002:

> these two interviews with Mike Nation indicate that he has taken his narrow, fragmented and personal view of a combat experience and made it into a comprehensive and understandable account...He has added context and justification to it to create a well-rounded story of much greater significance than it had when initially interviewed, and which did not exist in his mind two days after the battle.[122]

Richard Wallace has recently argued that rehearsal enhances the authenticity of accounts 'precisely because there is no intervention from a mediator'; 'Ironically…in being liberated from the co-creative interview process, the well-rehearsed anecdotal performance offers up a version of a participant's life history that is entirely their creation'.[123] An unrehearsed account is also less likely to be coherent, so more problematic as evidence, whereas rehearsed ones, as Wallace also points out, will necessarily include the clear description which enables anecdotes to work when delivered to their intended (often non-specialist) audience.[124]

The stilted veterans' stories which are all too common come about because of cultural expectations, an over-credulous audience, and a lack of scrutiny, not because any process of rehearsal inevitably results in a clichéd and predictable story. It is a central argument of this thesis that it is more fruitful to understand such processes and employ critical approaches than to damn oral history entirely. Moreover, most veterans

[122] Allison, 'Remembering a Vietnam War Firefight', p. 81.
[123] Richard Wallace, '"We might go into double act mode": "Professional Recollectors", Rehearsed Memory and its Uses, *Oral History*, 45/1 (Spring, 2017), pp. 56-7.
[124] Ibid., p. 65.

do a far better job of balancing rehearsal and rumination than the stereotype assumes. It cannot be said that there is an 'ideal' level of rehearsal, but there is a balance to be struck by interviewees, and a judgement to be made by the historian as to the impact on the usefulness of the testimony. All this supports the idea that the best approach for a first interview is an unstructured one which elicits the individual's pre-rehearsed life story—as the example of Howard Hoffman shows, a more interrogative approach is likely to not only be unnecessary but actually inhibit the testimony by disrupting the account's rehearsed organisational structure.[125]

To conclude the discussion of memory it is also important to consider the effects of ageing. Contrary to popular belief, the notion that memory inevitably declines significantly in old age—unless one is suffering from certain brain diseases—is a misconception. In fact, 'research into the relationship between ageing and memory demonstrates that in fact memory functions do not necessarily deteriorate with age as long as the subject remains healthy'; [126] and 'memory holds up well with age. Our abilities to call on our enormous networks of facts and associations are generally well preserved'.[127] Those difficulties with memory which can arise in old age tend to affect those recently encoded ones, not those which are decades old.[128] Moreover, memory can even improve in old age, as people go through a process called 'life review': having retired and with time to spare, possibly for the first time since they began working, they recollect events from their youth in an effort to look back on and make sense of

[125] Hoffman and Hoffman, 'The Case for Memory', in Jeffrey and Edwall (eds.), *Memory and History*, pp. 120-1, 126.
[126] Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 90.
[127] Schacter, *Searching For Memory*, p. 291.
[128] Ibid., pp. 286-89, 294.

their lives.[129] It is this generational effect which can more than anything else be attributed with motivating commemoration, war experience literature and oral history work about the Second World War since the 1990s. A result of life review is that the elderly are often better than the middle-aged at recalling events from their youth; this has been called the 'reminiscence bump'.[130] Since memories are encoded best during youth, soldiers were primed to record and reassess their war experiences, and the aged memory benefits from the process of life review, interviewing elderly veterans about their youthful experiences ought to be one of the most fruitful possible scenarios for oral history. In his seminal research on Anzac veterans Alistair Thomson noted that although the remembering of some of his interviewees was 'confused and disconnected, perhaps due to physical decline or as a result of isolation and neglect', in most cases 'remembering was vibrant and clear, and it was influenced more by the social experience of old age than by physical or emotional deterioration'.[131] As Lynn Abrams concludes, 'there is no reason to think that an older person's memory is less acute or reliable than that of a younger person. Whatever our age, we remember what is important to us'.[132]

With reference to the definition of reliability cited above, therefore, there is little reason to believe memories are particularly internally inconsistent. True, memory is variable and can be distorted in a variety of ways—ways which are assessed throughout the rest of the thesis—but there is little basis to the popular perception

[129] Thomson, 'Memory and Remembering in Oral History', in Ritchie (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, pp. 82-3.
[130] Schacter, *Searching for Memory*, pp. 297-8.
[131] Thomson, *Anzac Memories*, p. 183.
[132] Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 90.

that memories decay gradually and consistently over time. Rather, 'memory research suggests that long-term memory is remarkably robust'.[133] Memories are initially malleable and vulnerable to outside influences; however, once a narrative of an event is rehearsed it seems it will be likely to survive largely unchanged for decades.[134] Therefore, it is evident that personal memories are persistent and enduring enough to provide useful historical information. That those memories represent an incomplete record, and are vulnerable to distortion when they are recalled, does not justify claims that memory is inherently unreliable and worthless to the historian. As Nigel de Lee argues, 'even heavily contaminated or badly distorted evidence is better than none at all, so long as it is recognised for what it is'.[135]

Narrative Ability

A third issue is the ability to narrate one's remembered stories. The stereotype of the war veteran often imagines him giving a rambling, incoherent and confusing account. This is often assumed to be a sign of poor memory, but it does not follow that in this scenario the individual cannot *remember*: such displays have much more to do with the veteran's inability to express himself than they do with a decline in memory, which is ultimately a different cognitive function. There are veterans who can give a completely *coherent* account which contains little factual evidence because he cannot remember much. There are others who struggle to articulate themselves and provide a very *incoherent* account, which nonetheless is full of very detailed recollections of a

[133] Thomson, '*Anzac Memories* Revisited', p. 26.
[134] Allison, 'Remembering a Vietnam War Firefight', p. 82.
[135] de Lee, 'Oral History', in Addison and Calder (eds.), *Time to Kill*, p. 365.

great range of things. This is a distinction which has been under-acknowledged by scholars to date.

The difference is well-illustrated by the account of Mike Dauncey. A former glider pilot, his account of the Battle of Arnhem and his capture, imprisonment, escape and return to Allied lines is problematic because it is extremely disjointed and incoherent, apparently providing little in the way of useful historical evidence because the chronology is so difficult to piece together. Dauncey relates anecdotes as and when they come to mind, without much of an overarching structure. However, this account does nonetheless demonstrate the durability of memory. An online biography includes testimony from Dauncey provided some thirteen years prior, and this demonstrates substantial similarities, including many of the same phrases, indicating that he has had a set, very well-rehearsed account, and that even as his ability to coherently relate the account has reduced, the main points of fact and even entire phrases have barely changed at all in his memory.[136] His tendency to leave out traumatic aspects, and his silence on the circumstances of his being captured, are equally evident in both accounts. The chief difference is that the earlier account is much better organised. This appears to demonstrate that Dauncey's ability to narrate a coherent account has declined, not his memory. It seems that the initial account composed by Dauncey in the period after the war remained largely unchanged in his memory for the rest of his life, even as he began to find the story more difficult to relate. Since his two accounts differ only in *coherence*, whereas the facts of the narrative are the same, they pass

[136] 'Lieutenant Michael Donald Keen Dauncey', *The Pegasus Archive,* <http://www.pegasusarchive.org/arnhem/mike_dauncey.htm> [accessed December 2017]. This account is drawn in part from Patrick Wilson, *The War Behind the Wire: Experiences in Captivity During the Second World War* (Barnsley, 2000), pp. 43-9.

the test for reliability. The oral account presents an increased challenge in terms of validity, yet just because an interviewee's narrative ability has declined, this does not mean a judicious researcher cannot piece together the account and collect just as much interpretative evidence which can then be compared with other sources. The evidence is *disorganised*, but it has not necessarily been *distorted*.

The three issues of perception, memory and narration present important considerations, but none represents a fatal problem for oral history, and it is evident that oral testimony passes the reliability test.

Validity and Representativeness

The validity of the testimony will be demonstrated throughout the rest of the thesis, but it is worth considering here in some more depth. Oral evidence has often been criticised on the grounds that it is anecdotal; these criticisms tend to neglect the fact that all data are anecdotal until compared with others. While 'an isolated description of an event becomes a bit of esoterica whose worth cannot be properly evaluated',[137] the accumulation of many such descriptions indicates wider processes. A piece of evidence is valid if it can be corroborated with other evidence. Although this is often assumed to apply only to narrating events, even descriptions of unconnected and uncorroborated happenings can reveal attitudes and opinions which are widely shared, which, as Portelli argues, themselves constitute historical facts.[138] It seems clear that oral testimony can be compared like with like with other oral testimony, especially

[137] Hoffman, 'Reliability and Validity', in Dunaway and Baum (eds.), *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, p. 89.
[138] Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, pp. 50-1.

when the individuals concerned had common experiences, like fighting through the same campaign as members of the same Army.

Yet corroboration can also occur between different types of evidence, so it is important to note the relation between oral history and other types of source. Oral historians have suggested contrasting approaches to this issue in order to highlight its special benefits, some arguing that oral sources are so unique that they sit outside regular historical study,[139] but most making the common-sense point that as long as oral and written sources contain comparable information, then they can readily be compared.[140] As Brian Harrison points out 'The briefest reflection makes it clear that any firm distinction between oral and documentary evidence cannot be sustained'.[141] The subjectivity of oral sources is no grounds for drawing such a distinction: many sources long considered perfectly valid, such as judicial records, official statistics derived from questionnaires, and after-action reports based on a subaltern's partial judgement, are all subjective in origin. As many scholars have realised, 'Orality is woven into the very texture of the written official records'.[142]

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[139] Ronald J. Grele, 'Movement Without Aim: Methodological and Theoretical Problems in Oral History', in Perks and Thomson (eds.), *Oral History Reader*, First Edition, pp. 42-3; Frisch, 'Oral History and *Hard Times*', in Perks and Thomson (eds.), *Oral History Reader*, First Edition, pp. 32-3.
[140] Moss, 'Oral History: An Appreciation', in Dunaway and Baum (eds.), *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, p. 113; Thomson, '*Anzac Memories* Revisited', pp. 23-4; Hoffman, 'Reliability and Validity', in Dunaway and Baum (eds.), *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, pp. 91-2; Hoffman and Hoffman, 'The Case for Memory', in Jeffrey and Edwall (eds.), *Memory and History*, p. 124; Mark Roseman, 'Surviving Memory: Truth and Inaccuracy in Holocaust Testimony', in Perks and Thomson (eds.), *Oral History Reader*, p. 231; Tilly, 'People's History and Social Science History', pp. 464-5; Liddle and Richardson, 'Voices from the Past', p. 672; R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford, 1994), p. 489.
[141] Harrison, 'Oral History and Recent Political History', p. 31.
[142] Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, p. 5. See also Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, pp. 19-20; de Lee, 'Oral History', in Addison and Calder (eds.), *Time to Kill*, p. 364; Harrison, 'Oral History and Recent Political History', pp. 31, 35; Engen, *Canadians Under Fire*, pp. 33-4; Thomson, 'Memory and Remembering in Oral History', in Ritchie (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, pp. 90-1; Rosaldo, 'Doing Oral History', p. 92.

One of the major advantages of oral testimony in military history is that it fills a gap: human subjectivity—which can have major consequences on the outcome of events where issues such as morale or commanders' decision-making are concerned—is not well recorded by the conventional official written sources. It has also been noted that the 'Poor Bloody Infantry' who tend to bear the brunt of combat are among the soldiers least likely to write about their experiences,[143] and Charlotte Linde similarly points out that if even any literate person *can* write a diary, not everyone does, whereas having a life story which can be communicated orally is something every socially functioning adult must have.[144] Nigel de Lee suggests the role of oral history is one of substituting for missing records:

> Traditional modern academic scholars are hampered in their investigation of military operations because the forms of evidence they find most acceptable are often lacking, particularly documents. When in action, armies are mutually destructive and often careless of their records, particularly if they are being defeated or enjoying an unanticipated success. Such records as are kept are often minimal and may be unreliable. War diaries, even at corps HQ level, are often written up several days late. The use of telephone and wireless telegraphy, of personal liaison and verbal orders based on the erasable Chinagraph markings on maps, meant that many orders and decisions were not recorded in writing.[145]

Oral history certainly can substitute for such deficiencies in written records; however, another way of approaching this issue is to use oral sources to *complement* them. Although often careless, destructive, and censorious,[146] armies by and large are great bureaucracies, and military historians are fortunate to have at hand such a wealth of official documentation—which is, moreover, mostly considered worth preserving and

[143] Holmes, *Acts of War*, p. 10.
[144] Linde, *Life Stories*, pp. 1, 39, 42.
[145] de Lee, 'Oral History', in Addison and Calder (eds.), *Time to Kill*, p. 362.
[146] Ibid., pp. 367-8.

making publicly available—to supplement unofficial written and oral accounts. Oral history originally came about by necessity in areas of study where nothing like this documentation exists. Military historians have the opportunity not only to employ oral history in a 'recovery' role but also, by comparing and cross-referencing, to combine official and personal accounts into something greater than the sum of its parts.

Such an approach can integrate oral sources since, although they are different to written records in some respects, in others they are markedly similar. Oral sources require *analysing* in a particular way, as the manner of their creation is in many ways unique; this analysis is really the subject of this thesis. However, there is no difference between oral and written sources which demands the information they contain be *employed* in a different way in producing historical interpretations. As Lynn Abrams states: 'It is the practice of oral history—the doing of it—rather than the content derived from it, that marks out this method of historical research as different.'[147]

Of all the possible sources for the military historian, perhaps the closest similarity is between oral testimony and written memoirs; both are retrospective analyses of one's own life experience, and while most autobiography is the preserve of the successful and famous, wars are one of the few events considered important enough to allow 'normal' participants to produce commercially viable autobiography.[148] It might therefore be asked whether the wealth of published military memoirs do not provide more than enough in terms of personal recollections of events such as the Second World War. The similarities should not be overstated, however. A vital difference is

[147] Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 18; Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, p. 46.
[148] Linde, *Life Stories*, p. 39.

that memoirs are purely *auto*biographical, while oral sources involve an intersubjective dialogue between interviewer and interviewee. They are one of the few historical sources in which the historian is themselves involved in the source's creation.[149] This means that interviewers can search deeper, and the accounts produced can be more perceptive, more probing, more multifaceted, than autobiography. Furthermore, interviews can be more immediate and honest: 'It is the opportunity presented of catching the informant off-guard (without any malign intent), which is one of the interview's great virtues.'[150] As Nigel de Lee explains:

> A written document can be examined and discussed, but it cannot be interrogated. Anomalies can be spotted, but not challenged and explored, as they can be with a living and intelligent source...An informant may seek to record false or deficient information, but it is easier to lie with calculation, or to deceive oneself undetected, when writing than when speaking. When it is necessary to evaluate and judge evidence, the spoken word can and will yield and convey more meaning than the written, especially when it carries an emotional charge.[151]

Autobiography's focus on the author's public persona and achievements means that commonplace events which form important parts of oral testimony can be omitted,[152] and it has much in common with the over-rehearsed testimony discussed above in the way that it can produce idealised, self-justifying stories which relate little to what really took place.[153] Oral history, by contrast, elicits accounts which are uncertain,

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[149] Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, pp. 56-7; Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, pp. 16, 24; Holstein and Gubrium, *The Active Interview*, p. 4.
[150] Harrison 'Oral History and Recent Political History', p. 45.
[151] de Lee, 'Oral History', in Addison and Calder (eds.), *Time to Kill*, pp. 363-4. See also Joanna Bornat, 'Is Oral History Auto/Biography?', *Auto/Biography*, 3/1 (1994), p. 23; Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, p. 279; Anna Green, 'Individual Remembering and "Collective Memory": Theoretical Presuppositions and Contemporary Debates', *Oral History*, 32/2 (Autumn, 2004), pp. 40-1; Liddle and Richardson, 'Voices from the Past', pp. 654-5; McManners, *The Scars of War*, p. 8; Hoffman, 'Reliability and Validity', in Dunaway and Baum (eds.), *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*; Coffman, 'Talking About War', p. 589.
[152] Linde, *Life Stories*, pp. 40, 42.
[153] The example of Victor Gregg is discussed in Chapter Four.

paradoxical, and ambiguous in their meaning, and therein lies their advantage. They are inconvenient sources, but ones which are more genuine records of people's real, complex, confusing lives.

Validity does not necessarily indicate representativeness: corroboration of a piece of evidence indicates it is veridical but does not necessarily mean that what it describes was normal. An extraordinary event might be corroborated by multiple sources, but this does not mean it can be taken as representative of a broader state of affairs; to demonstrate this requires another stage of analysis. Multiple pieces of corroborated evidence can be compared to determine which data is normal, or representative, and which is abnormal, or unrepresentative. Yet, although the purpose of history is, broadly speaking, to derive generalisations about the past—rendering the broad meanings of enormously complex events comprehensible—emphasising representativeness can be problematic. Common and uncommon events were equally real to those who lived through them, and a drive for representativeness risks entrenching orthodox interpretations and ironing out many of the unusual events which are some of the most interesting parts of history. Unusual events can, moreover, be of great consequence: 'in battle the actions of individuals can be of vital significance, and information in the possession of single persons can be of vital historical importance.'[154]

A solution to this problem is presented by the work of Andrew Gelman and Thomas Basbøll, who suggest that both representative and unrepresentative evidence has its

[154] de Lee, 'Oral History', in Addison and Calder (eds.), *Time to Kill*, p. 365.

place in a system of knowledge. They point out that while evidence is usually expected to be representative, some gains its importance by being unusual, serving 'not to pile on evidence in support of one theory or another but rather to shine a spotlight on an anomaly…interesting stories often represent the surprising cases that represent the limits of our understanding'.[155] This can show deficiencies with current models and motivate the development of more nuanced models and deeper comprehension.[156] In history, interpretations can be tested against the norm to demonstrate their general accuracy but also against exceptions to reveal their limitations and areas of oversimplification. Unusual stories are valuable for demonstrating the extremes of experience, or providing an 'exception that proves the rule'; therefore, the exceptional ought to be remarked upon, not excluded on the grounds of unrepresentativeness.

Suggesting that oral evidence tends to be reliable and valid should not be taken to mean it is superior to contemporary evidence; a candid letter written at the time will almost certainly give a more accurate impression of a soldier's thoughts than a memory of seventy years ago. Yet while acknowledging the limitations of oral history, one should remember its particular advantages. It complements contemporary evidence in a way no other type of source can. Oral history is living and responsive; it enables historians to ask questions and elicit information about subjects the contemporary sources failed to record. Even within extremely-well known events, oral history has the potential to reveal marginalised aspects. Military history is quite unique

[155] Andrew Gelman and Thomas Basbøll, 'When Do Stories Work? Evidence and Illustration in the Social Sciences', *Sociological Methods and Research*, 43/4 (2014), p. 16.
[156] Ibid., p. 17.

in the way that there is potential for oral history to not only expand the record but also deepen it by adding new perspectives even in well-trodden areas.

Reliability and validity are the basic criteria for a source to be usable as historical evidence; it is clear that memory usually provides a reliable record of past experiences, and that oral evidence can readily be compared with other sources. However, the analysis of oral sources provides unique problems, as they are fundamentally subjective sources. It is necessary to explore more deeply the particular subjective distortions which arise in veterans' testimony, and this is the objective of the next four chapters.

Chapter 2
Popular Memory and the British Army in the Second World War

Interviewees draw upon shared conceptions of the past to produce their oral testimony: this process, known as popular memory, is a vital concept in oral history. French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs was responsible for coining the term 'collective memory' in 1925, and this marked the beginning of the shift from understanding memory as an individual psychological process to a shared cultural one. Halbwachs argued that an individual's memory is always situated within a social consciousness of the event or period in question. Personal experiences that accord with collective memory tend to predominate and ones which do not tend to be marginalised. In 1982 the Popular Memory Group further explored the processes by which private and collective memory struggle in the creation of a dominant narrative of history, stressing that no interpretation is ever ubiquitous or uncontested.[157] The term popular memory therefore specifically indicates the way personal and collective memory simultaneously compete with and support one another—'there are always struggles over the past involving dominant, subordinate and marginalised groups, but there is always a reciprocal relationship between private and public memory'.[158] More recently, the concept of the 'cultural circuit' has been developed to describe the way in which personal memories make their way into public discourse, where they are 'adapted, glossed and elaborated, and become woven into the generalized, public form of those stories', which go on to influence how later individuals articulate *their* personal stories

[157] Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, pp. 95-97; Popular Memory Group, 'Popular Memory', in Perks and Thomson (eds.), *Oral History Reader*, pp. 43-53.
[158] Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, pp. 96-7.

in turn.[159] Many popular historical perceptions take the form of discourses—ideas about the world that are widely taken for granted within a social group as common-sense knowledge, absent of the need for specific evidence-based justification.[160] Popular memory is also related to the concept of historical myth. This may be defined as a shared, simplified, but not wholly incorrect interpretation of a period of particular national importance—an especially stable and widely recognised example of popular memory. As Mark Connelly has argued, the British myth of the Second World War 'contains many elements of truth and should be viewed as a particular explanation and interpretation of events rather than as a cleverly designed falsification of reality';[161] as one of its main critics argues, 'the word "Myth" should not be taken to be equivalent to untruth, much less to lies'.[162] It is now firmly recognised that the cultural context described by these concepts plays a crucial role in how all individuals think about the past, resulting in what in the arts and humanities has been called the 'memory boom', an interest in the way the past is remembered throughout society.

The popular memory of the Second World War is crucial here because it not only informs people's beliefs about events they did not personally witness,[163] but also provides a framework for the recollection of participants' personal experiences. This process, known as 'composure', is one of the key theoretical principles in oral history. Coined in the early 1990s by Graham Dawson—although evident in the writings of

[159] Richard Johnson, 'What is Cultural Studies Anyway?', *Anglistica* 26/1-2, (1983), pp. 26-39, cited in Dawson, *Soldier Heroes*, p. 24; Summerfield, 'Culture and Composure', p. 68.
[160] Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, pp. 63-4.
[161] Mark Connelly, *We Can Take It!: Britain and the Memory of the Second World War* (Harlow, 2004), p. 1.
[162] Angus Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz* (London, 1991), p. xiii.
[163] Connelly, *We Can Take It!*, pp. 3, 300

various other scholars—[164]it is a two-fold concept which describes firstly how people bring their past and current lives, and their past and current selves, into alignment to 'compose' a narrative which 'can be lived with in relative psychic comfort',[165] and secondly the end result of this process, respondents having 'achieved composure' once they have formulated an account they feel comfortable telling:

> The cultural importance of storytelling lies not only in the stories we are told…but also in those we ourselves tell, or compose. It is a cultural practice deeply embedded in everyday life, a creative activity in which everyone engages. Even the most mundane of narratives is an active composition, created through the formal arrangement of narrative elements into a whole.[166]

As Lynn Abrams explains, 'The life story interview invites the narrator to dig deep, to reflect on the inner self, to reconcile any conflicts and then to reconstruct the self as a coherent whole in the form of a single narrative...the interview becomes a process in which the respondent actively fashions an identity.'[167] Popular memory is vital in this process because:

> The effort towards composure is an inescapably social process…Subjective composure fundamentally depends on social recognition, with its power to confirm that the versions of self and world figured in a narrative correspond to those of other people…The narrative resource of a culture—its repertoire of shared and recognised forms—therefore functions as a currency of recognisable social identities.[168]

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[164] Thomson, *Anzac Memories*, pp. 8-11; Linde, *Life Stories*; Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, p. 26; B. Davies, 'Women's Subjectivity and Feminist Stories', in C. Ellis and M. G. Flaherty, *Investigating Subjectivity: Research on Lived Experience* (London, 1992), p. 54, cited in Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives*, p. 13; Roy Schafer, 'Narration in the Psychoanalytic Dialogue', in W. J. T. Mitchell (ed.), *On Narrative* (Chicago, 1981), cited in Gadi BenEzer, 'Trauma Signals in Life Stories', in Rogers and Leydesdorff (eds)., *Trauma*, p. 37.
[165] Dawson, *Soldier Heroes*, p. 23.
[166] Ibid., p. 22.
[167] Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 33.
[168] Dawson, *Soldier Heroes*, p. 23.

In this way people continually re-compose past experiences in order to present stories and a sense of self which satisfy expectations at the time and in the particular circumstances in which the stories are being told. If this cannot be done, this can cause 'discomposure', 'a kind of psychic unease at [one's] inability to align subjective experience with discourse', which can result in difficulty telling the story, self-contradiction and silences.[169]

Understanding the processes of composure among the interviewees is necessary to understand the meaning of their testimony; this chapter therefore aims to define the popular memory of the British Army as generally understood, and assess the main discourses with which the interviewees are likely to bring their narratives into alignment in order to achieve composure. In cultural history soldiers have often been viewed through rather simple forms which fail to recognise the level of ambiguity in veterans' identities, as in Dawson's influential formulation, for instance, in which 'soldier heroes' are held to represent the pinnacle of masculinity: 'The soldier hero has proved to be one of the most durable and powerful forms of idealized masculinity within Western cultural traditions since the time of the Ancient Greeks. Military virtues such as aggression, strength, courage and endurance have repeatedly been defined as the natural and inherent qualities of manhood, whose apogee is attainable only in battle'.[170] This interpretation certainly has a basis in reality but, in relation to Second World War Army veterans, seems insufficiently nuanced. It is assumed that the 'soldier hero' represents a dominant or 'hegemonic' representation; however, the fact 'soldier

[169] Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 69.
[170] Dawson, *Soldier Heroes*, p. 1.

heroes' provide attractive idealised forms for civilian men does not mean veterans will find them similarly attractive. There is a risk of downplaying alternative discourses around soldiering, such as 'victim-veteran constructions' and the presumption of war trauma.[171] Many of these ideas have evidently advanced considerably due to social changes since Dawson penned his assessment in the early 1990s. While soldiers still encapsulate masculinity for many, this is now by no means a straightforward or uncontested identity for veterans to take on. The limited applicability of the 'soldier hero' is evidenced in the testimonies of Bill Partridge and Robert Purver: both secure in their identities as soldiers and proud of their military service, they openly state that 'I have a sensitive nature'[172], and 'I could describe myself as a gentle man, I had no aggression, I got no hostility'.[173] Evidently, these men are happy to present identities which would contradict fairly directly the 'hegemonic' notion of military masculinity as analogous to aggression, strength and endurance.

It is therefore necessary to establish a more nuanced picture of the various discourses Second World War veterans' narratives are subject to. The popular memory of the Second World War has been a subject of substantial research, but the specific position of the Army in this has not been the focus of much attention, and as it pertains to the British Army between D-Day and VE Day any popular memory is complex and difficult to define compared with, say, the heroic and egalitarian image of Australian and New

[171] Jerry Lembcke, 'War Trauma in the Construction of American Lost-War Culture', *Proceedings of the Third Conference on Veterans in Society* (2015), <https://vtechworks.lib.vt.edu/handle/10919/72939> [accessed January 2018], p. 49; Yuval Noah Harari, 'Martial Illusions: War and Disillusionment in Twentieth-Century and Renaissance Military Memoirs', Journal of Military History, 69/1 (Jan., 2005), pp. 45-7.
[172] Partridge, 4, 01.
[173] Purver, 2, 36.

Zealand troops in both world wars, which has been extensively explored.[174] The most important features are the British national myth of the Second World War, which has been called the 'People's War'; the popular memory of the 1944-5 campaign specifically; the popular historiography of the British Army; and discourses around veterancy which relate to 'trauma culture'. These contrast in certain ways but there are also major points of agreement and as a whole they provide quite a stable interpretation through which the veterans can compose their accounts. The combined effect is to cause veterans to downplay their agency to influence events and characterise the war not as an active achievement but an experience which simply had to be endured—in which victory was analogous to survival.

The British Myth of the Second World War

In the 2010s it is possible to perceive that one relatively consistent and stable public interpretation of the British role in the Second World War exists, which a large proportion of the population appears to recognise and accept, and which is not subject to widespread contestation. This is the myth identified by historians as the 'People's War'—a period of national unity, when the nation demonstrated its character by enduring in the face of, and ultimately triumphing over, Nazi aggression. Graham Dawson noted in 1984 that an interpretation which originated during the war continued to define the popular memory: 'The central and founding myth of World War II is of a nation *united* through idolatry for its totemic leader Churchill. All other mythic aspects of the war are subordinated to this one, that had its genesis in May

[174] Thomson, *Anzac Memories*, pp. 1-7; Hutching, 'Oral History and War', in Ritchie (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, p. 239.

1940, and is reproduced to this day.'[175] To a great extent, this remains true in the 2010s. It was the period between the Dunkirk evacuation and the end of the Blitz, Dawson maintains, when the civilian and military spheres most closely converged and which is the crucial period for the myth.[176] As Mark Connelly stresses, 'Britain's memory of the war is skewed towards the early years of the conflict because this suits Britain's self-perception: resolute in a crisis and at its best when alone.'[177] In the People's War, Dunkirk, the Battle of Britain, and the Blitz, are together perceived as the nation's greatest triumph. Reeling from defeat in the Battle of France, the nation turned defeat into victory at Dunkirk, with the 'Little Ships' manned by patriotic civilians crucial to the salvation of the Army to fight another day. With the Army reduced to impotence, the pilots of Fighter Command saved the nation by defeating the Luftwaffe, and the British people themselves endured the Blitz according to a 'popular image of placid fortitude'.[178]

The People's War is dominant, but is not necessarily the only public interpretation and by no means universal. Different sectors of society are likely to view the war in different ways; moreover, assessments of the war in history and culture have shifted since 1945, resulting in generational variations in perception. It is also important to acknowledge the limitations in the way these discourses are assessed. In many ways popular memory is invisible, and the primary means of assessing it is by examining popular cultural and historical products, with the assumption that these would not sell

[175] Graham Dawson and Bob West, 'Our Finest Hour? The Popular Memory of World War II and the Struggle over National Identity', in Geoff Hurd (ed.), *National Fictions: World War Two in British Films and Television* (London, 1984), p. 11. Original emphasis. Connelly, *We Can Take It!*, pp. 1, 8.
[176] Graham Dawson, 'History-Writing on World War II', in Hurd (ed.), *National Fictions*, p. 4.
[177] Connelly, *We Can Take It!*, p. 14.
[178] Richard Overy, *The Bombing War: Europe 1939-1945* (London, 2013), p. 126.

unless they conformed reasonably closely to the views of their consumers.[179] Yet in doing this one risks equating the most publicly acceptable interpretation to the private views of everyone in a society which is highly stratified along the lines of class, gender, ethnicity and age. It is too simplistic to believe that popular memory is universal, especially given the arguments put forward in favour of individual memory. As the concept of the cultural circuit demonstrates, different ideas certainly exist, ready to be picked up and distributed through the mechanism of popular culture. Nonetheless, as Connelly notes, 'It is never assumed that this memory was owned and perpetuated by one particular group within society; or that it can be ascribed absolutely and without qualification to all British people, but it is argued that its broad outlines and salient points can'.[180]

Recent popular depictions demonstrate that the mythic interpretation of 1940 remains meaningful. Christopher Nolan's film *Dunkirk* (2017) gives a very traditional assessment of Operation DYNAMO, focussing on the trapped soldiers on the beach and the efforts of a tiny number of RAF pilots and the 'Little Ships' to help them. The efforts of the Allied troops to hold the perimeter are scarcely portrayed, while the Royal Navy, which actually evacuated the majority of the troops, is included only in order for each of its ships to be promptly sunk; yet it was the film's neglecting to represent Indian and African soldiers, not its peddling of the mythical version of

[179] See Hurd (ed.), *National Fictions*; Connelly, *We Can Take It!*; Sam Edwards, 'The Beginning of the End: D-Day in British Memory', in Michael Dolski, Sam Edwards, and John Buckley (eds.), *D-Day in History and Memory: The Normandy Landings in International Memory and Commemoration* (Denton, TX, 2014); Thomson, *Anzac Memories*.
[180] Connelly, *We Can Take It!*, p. 3.

Dunkirk, which stoked controversy.[181] *Darkest Hour* (2018) also portrays the 'Little Ships' as the saviours of both the Army and the impotent Royal Navy, while one fictionalised scene in which Churchill talks with ordinary Londoners is a clear evocation of the unanimous sense of defiance which supposedly defined the 'spirit of 1940'. Although the People's War is in many ways incompatible with both historical research and personal recollection, it has been extremely durable, and must therefore, Dawson reasons, be invested with significant meaning.[182] Popular cultural products demonstrate that it provides a framework for understanding the Second World War still widely recognised throughout British society today.

Historical opinion has swung from endorsing the 'People's War', to criticising it for its idealistic ironing-out of inconvenient facts, to settling on a compromise position in the middle-ground.[183] Recent scholarship has reasoned that the myth of the 'People's War' perhaps enjoys such persistence because it is a reflection of historical reality: 'What is extremely hard to explain away is the extent to which ordinary people at the time seem themselves to have felt that they were living through a quite special moment of history, a time when the people they knew behaved more selflessly than in the past, when the country meant more to them, and the usually inarticulate British said so rather more often than usual.'[184] Whatever the case—and here the concern is with

[181] Sunny Singh, 'Why the Lack of Indian and African Faces in Dunkirk Matters', *The Guardian*, 1st August 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/aug/01/indian-african-dunkirk-history-whitewash-attitudes> [accessed January 2018].
[182] Dawson, 'History-Writing on World War II', in Hurd (ed.), *National Fictions*, p. 2.
[183] Angus Calder, *The People's War: Britain 1939-1945* (London, 1969); Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz*; Connelly, *We Can Take It!*; John Ramsden, 'Myths and Realities of the "People's War" in Britain', in Jörg Echternkamp and Stefan Martens (eds.), *Experience and Memory: The Second World War in Europe* (Oxford, 2010).
[184] Ibid., p. 46; Corinna Peniston-Bird, '"All in it together" and "Backs to the wall": Relating Patriotism and the 'People's War' in the 21st Century', *Oral History*, 40/2 (Autumn, 2012), p. 73; Connelly, *We Can Take It!*, p. 300.

perception, not *fact*—it is through phrases such as 'Blitz spirit', 'stiff upper lip', and 'keep calm and carry on', that the war is still understood by many people. As Corinna Peniston-Bird notes, '[The] motifs of "being all in it together" and "doing your bit"' provide 'a narrative framework shared and readily understood…and one which finds little contestation in other public arenas'.[185]

A key feature of the People's War is its conflation of military and civilian experiences; one of its central tenets is 'the idea of the war as primarily a civilian experience'.[186] The war was seemingly won as much on the home front as on the fighting front, and so 'It was inherent in the construction of the "People's War" that patriotic service was not reserved for the members of the Armed Forces, but could be exhibited on the Home Front also'.[187] The fact civilians came under attack was vital to this interpretation: 'The endurance of the Blitzed population at home was used to point to a common experience and an equality of sacrifice by servicemen and civilians'.[188] As Lucy Noakes similarly points out, 'the Blitz has become an important part of public memories of the war because public images and memories of it overwhelmingly present a unified picture of Britain at war; a time when "we" were all soldiers in the front line'.[189] According to the myth, 'Surviving the Nazi onslaught ensured that its stain would be removed from the world and that the British way of life would continue'.[190] In this way civilian endurance is perceived as having been of material

[185] Peniston-Bird, 'Patriotism and the 'People's War'', p. 72; Edwards, 'D-Day in British Memory', in Dolski, Edwards and Buckley (eds.), *D-Day in History and Memory*, pp. 104-5.
[186] Sally Sokoloff, 'Soldiers or Civilians? The Impact of Army Service in World War II on Birmingham Men', *Oral History*, 25/2 (Autumn, 1997), p. 59.
[187] Peniston-Bird, 'Patriotism and the People's War', p. 74.
[188] Sokoloff, 'Soldiers or civilians?', p. 60.
[189] Lucy Noakes, 'Making Histories: Experiencing the Blitz in London's Museums in the 1990s', in Gordon Martel (ed.) *The World War II Reader* (London, 2004), p. 423.
[190] Connelly, *We Can Take It!*, p. 55.

importance to the nation's surviving the key period in 1940 which forms the foundation of the People's War, and therefore in winning the war as a whole.

The military campaigns which directly defeated the Third Reich are less central to the myth, and can be seen as an inevitable consequence of 1940: even if it would take a further five years to finally defeat Nazi Germany, simply by enduring, the British people had ensured the war would be won. Soldiers' actions became barely distinct in their perceived historical importance from those of blitzed civilians. If the 'People's War' is taken as the most publicly influential popular interpretation of the Second World War—though this is not to suggest that it is the only one—then the British Army occupies a curious and problematic position in relation to this myth. For the interviewees there is pride to be felt in their participation in the national triumph which was the Second World War—they do not struggle for public recognition of their experiences as do Argentine veterans of the Falklands War, for example[191]—but nonetheless soldiers' experiences are subsumed under the civilianised interpretation of the war which stresses stoic, but essentially passive, endurance.

Sally Sokoloff has suggested that in political terms, too, veterans were elided with the rest of British society. 'The notion of the forties as a crucible of social and political change for the British people extends to seeing soldiers as "civilians in uniform" who retained so much of a civilian attitude that they returned to post-war life unchanged by the experience apart from the natural growing up of young men away from home'.[192] Certainly, incorporating a new generation of less deferential recruits has

[191] Federico Lorenz (trans. Gabriel Ozón), 'The Unending War: Social Myth, Individual Memory and the Malvinas', in Rogers and Leydesdorff (eds.), *Trauma*, pp. 95-112.
[192] Sokoloff, 'Soldiers or Civilians?', p. 59.

been noted as one of the Army's main challenges during the war, but if the Army had to adapt to its recruits, they also had to adapt to the Army.[193] Based on her interviews with Birmingham veterans, Sokoloff reports no evidence of the political radicalisation in the Army which is often suggested to have been a factor in the Labour landslide in the 1945 general election, and suggests on the contrary that more conservative values were inculcated by army service: 'The imprints of discipline, authority, hierarchy, and comradeship which were experienced in the Army by young men in the ranks have displaced any radicalisation that may have taken place because of the war'.[194] However, although they evidently took on some of the values of the Army, popular perceptions of a united wartime nation, and of a people's army that was essentially a reflection of wider British society, caused Sokoloff's veterans to downplay the lasting effects of army service, and imply that they quickly moved on from the war after demobilisation.[195] Ultimately, the 'homogenisation of a 'People's War' experience helped to minimise the sense of specialness of the 1939-1945 armed service veterans in the post-war period.'[196]

Civilianised as it may be, the People's War does have space to acknowledge the evident reality that the war involved a great deal of actual fighting; yet the important combat roles are attributed to a minority of elite combatants, which excludes most veterans. While for the First World War the volunteer soldier in the trenches is the key

[193] Jeremy A. Crang, *The British Army and the People's War 1939-1945* (Manchester, 2000), p. 2; Allport, *Browned Off*, pp. xxiii, 59-85.
[194] Sokoloff, 'Soldiers or Civilians?', p. 65. This question is reassessed in Jonathan Fennell's recent *Fighting the People's War: The British and Commonwealth Armies and the Second World War* (Cambridge, 2019).
[195] Ibid., p. 60.
[196] Ibid., p. 59.

figure in the popular perception, for the Second World War 'it was the pilot of the Royal Air Force who occupied the position at the pinnacle of the hierarchy of wartime roles',[197] and the prestige of the fighter pilots of the Battle of Britain remains scarcely dented today, resistant to reassessments which have argued that it 'was never a contest of the Few against the Many'[198] (bomber crews receive less attention). Britain's sailors also gained prestige for defeating the U-Boat threat, ensuring the nation could be fed. These perceptions may indeed have originated during the war, when the immediate implementation of conscription, the fact the RAF and the Royal Navy had their pick of the high-quality recruits, the increased importance of the air and naval aspects of the war, and the general inactivity of the Army in the key period of 1940-1, all served to reduce the prestige of soldiers.[199] As national solidarity ebbed as a theme in post-war culture, wartime perceptions may have resurfaced; or perhaps this is related to a conception of the Second World War as a war of machines rather than bodies.[200]

Popular cultural depictions of the Army have reflected the way that, as events fade from living memory, nuance is lost and simplification occurs. The Army had a place in generalised heroic depictions of the People's War in the immediate post-war period—'After 1945 war films could celebrate victory and Britain's role in winning it. The conflict

[197] Juliette Pattinson, '"Skirkers", "Scrimjacks", and "Scrimshanks"?: British Civilian Masculinity and Reserved Occupations, 1914-1945', *Gender and History*, 28/3 (November, 2016), p. 709; Penny Summerfield and Corinna Peniston-Bird, *Contesting Home Defence: Men, Women and the Home Guard in the Second World War* (Manchester, 2007), p. 15; Thomson, *Anzac Memories*, p. 188.
[198] Overy, *The Bombing War*, p. 89.
[199] Pattinson, 'British Civilian Masculinity', p. 709; Allport, *Browned Off*, pp. 71-3; David French, *Raising Churchill's Army: The British Army and the War against Germany 1919-1945* (Oxford, 2011), pp. 64-5, 70; Crang, *The British Army and the People's War*, pp. 6-7; Connelly, *We Can Take It!*, pp. 96, 201.
[200] Ellis, 'Reflections on the Sharp End of War', in Addison and Calder (eds.), *Time To Kill*, p. 15.

was generally depicted as a good war in which Britain's national solidarity and heroic deeds were emphasized.'[201] Yet soon 'The democratic equality highlighted during the war drifted away from the foreground' in favour of portrayals of the 'hierarchies and masculinity' of the military.[202] Juvenile literature portrayed soldiers as manly heroes carrying out dashing missions to thwart the Nazis, and occasionally sacrificing themselves for their country. Yet from the 1950s cinematic assessments did not treat all servicemen equally, as the focus was on the deeds of individuals, 'the dilemmas faced by exceptionally heroic men' who were marked out as *not* being normal.[203] Certain elite units began to receive a disproportionate amount of popular attention. War films were often 'simply exciting adventure stories set against the backdrop of war', usually involving special forces, while serious attempts to portray more typical Army experiences, such as *A Bridge Too Far* (1977)—which, although featuring the Paras, was a negative story about the consequences of command hubris for the front-line troops—saw a more mixed reception.[204] In the 2010s it is Commandos, SAS, and Paras who are mostly attributed with decisive, high-intensity operations on land; the popular history obsession with special forces indicates this, as does the idea evident mainly in US-produced video games that Britain, as the 'brains' of the Allied war effort, directed its fighting power towards clandestine missions rather than conventional military operations.[205] Meanwhile the British Second World War film has largely disappeared, the children's comics only remain for nostalgic purposes, and the few

[201] Bond, *Britain's Two World Wars*, p. 10.
[202] Mark Connelly, '"We Can Take It": Britain and the Memory of the Home Front in the Second World War', in Echternkamp and Martens (eds.), *Experience and Memory*, pp. 59-60.
[203] Robert Murphy, *British Cinema and the Second World War* (London, 2000), p. 234.
[204] Michael Paris, 'Introduction: Film, Television and the Second World War—The First Fifty Years', in Paris (ed.), *Repicturing the Second World War*, p. 6.
[205] Connelly, *We Can Take It!*, pp. 228-31.

recent depictions—*Dunkirk* for instance—stress the 'pity of war' rather than the Army's fighting ability.

Another factor strengthening the popular memory has been a reluctance to fixate on battlefield violence during the Second World War—the 'mud and blood' of the First World War remains a much more durable image. Brian Bond has noted how, although many writers have amply described the dire conditions of the Second World War battlefield, 'That they have not had a comparable impact on public opinion remains a mystery. Perhaps combatants in the later war have convinced themselves that none of the dreadful conditions, hardships and miseries they experienced were comparable to what their fathers had endured in the trenches between 1914 and 1918.'[206] Although this idea may be altering under the influence of modern discourses on soldiering and ever more authentic portrayals of the violence of the Second World War, it is still evident that the trenches of the Somme resonate emotionally in a way that even the notorious hedgerows of Normandy simply do not. Downplaying the unpleasantness of battlefield conditions further facilitates the conflation of military and civilian experiences, permitting the self-effacing character of the British soldier, determined yet not ideological, to be seen as an extension of the 'keep calm and carry on' mentality demonstrated by the nation as a whole. The People's War, then provides a dominant framework for remembering the war, and one which the interviewees largely defer to, although they undermine it in some ways, as the next chapter will demonstrate.

[206] Bond, *Britain's Two World Wars Against Germany*, pp. 86-7; Sheffield, 'The Shadow of the Somme', in Addison and Calder (eds.), *Time to Kill*, pp. 36-37; Ellis, 'Reflections on the Sharp End of War', in Addison and Calder (eds.), *Time To Kill*, pp. 14-15.

The Popular Memory of D-Day

If the People's War attributes victory to the conduct of the British people in the 'backs to the wall' period of 1940-1, soldiers can claim their own successes. D-Day is in the Anglophone world the most widely remembered event of the war, as the substantial commemorations and the vast literature around the battle demonstrate. It is D-Day which is perceived as the defining event of the campaign to victory, even though many battles in the subsequent ten months would dwarf the landings in effort and cost. Even the remainder of the Normandy campaign tends to be downplayed compared with the first day of the landings: if Antony Beevor's 2009 book sought 'explicitly to challenge aspects of the American and Ambrosian narrative of the landings'[207] by assessing the campaign from start to finish in its full breadth, the need to appeal to a popular audience required that it nonetheless be entitled *D-Day*.[208]

The focus on D-Day can be attributed to two main factors. The first is a matter of evident strategic reality: D-Day was the point of main jeopardy for the Allied war effort in 1944-5. Even though German victory was inconceivable by this stage in the war, failure in Normandy could delay victory by years, result in thousands more Allied casualties, and even make possible Soviet occupation of Western Europe. Once the beachhead was securely established, on the other hand, the Allies could expect to make steady progress towards Germany itself. Secondly, D-Day has been invested with meaning by the participant nations. For Americans, it is the key moment in a moral crusade to vanquish evil. For the British, similar ideas are also bound up with

[207] Edwards, 'D-Day in British Memory', in Dolski, Edwards and Buckley (eds.), *D-Day in History and Memory*, p. 117.
[208] Antony Beevor, *D-Day: The Battle for Normandy* (London, 2009).

assessments of Britain's imperial decline: D-Day represented a last demonstration of British military force before it was superseded by the burgeoning power of the United States. Aligned with the 'People's War', D-Day serves as a counterpoint to Dunkirk 'that redeemed the earlier evacuation'.[209] Furthermore, it arguably functions as microcosm of the entire war: in the same way that 'the first day of the Somme' encompasses the notions of naïvety, futility and uncaring generalship which have come to define the First World War in British popular memory, D-Day signifies unity within and between nations, moral righteousness and the military and industrial might of the Allies in the Second World War.

The popular view of D-Day does not gel perfectly with the 'People's War', however. As Mark Connelly points out in his perceptive exploration of the myth, not only do the British like narratives of 'starting off on the wrong foot', but the myth focuses on the period where Britain 'took it' rather than 'gave it', and this period 'is far more attractive to the British than the moment they began to unleash their power'.[210] Soldiers of the first half of the war therefore encapsulate the best aspects of British character, despite, and indeed *because of*, their endearing amateurishness and lack of military success. 'D-Day', by contrast, 'was not a natural fit within [the framework of the People's War]: it was a purely military operation conducted without direct civilian input, and as a victorious offensive action it lacked the romantic qualities the British find so attractive in defense [sic] and defeats.'[211] When viewed through the lens of

[209] Edwards, 'The Beginning of the End: D-Day in British Memory', in Dolski, Edwards and Buckley (eds.), *D-Day in History and Memory*, pp. 105-6.
[210] Connelly, *We Can Take It!*, pp. 14-15.
[211] Edwards, 'D-Day in British Memory', in Dolski, Edwards and Buckley (eds.), *D-Day in History and Memory*, p. 105.

certain aspects of British national character, victory gained through superior force appears quite possibly unfair, unsporting and therefore 'unBritish': while Connelly cites the example of strategic bombing,[212] this interpretation might also be applied to the land campaigns, in which it is the Germans, whatever their political flaws, who are often cast in the role of the plucky underdogs with the odds stacked against them.[213] Therefore there exists a tension between the People's War and the British Army's becoming an ever more effective fighting force: as it came closer to winning the war, it began to reflect key principles of British national character less and less. Besides this there is an implication inherent in the People's War that victory was virtually assured once the Nazi threat to Britain had been ended, and certainly after the Normandy landings had been successfully carried out.[214] This serves to reduce the importance attributed to the actions of British soldiers in 1944-5. The Army did not need to turn the tide of the war, like 'The Few' had done in 1940—the war was already won, and all that the soldiers needed to do was 'stick it out' until the inevitable victory became reality. The exception is the Battle of Arnhem, in which the British were once again on the back foot, which helps to explain why it remains undoubtedly the most famous episode of the campaign after D-Day.[215]

[212] Connelly, *We Can Take It!*, p. 14.
[213] This goes some way to explaining the enduring fascination with figures such as Hans von Luck and Kurt Meyer, who have been seen—however misguidedly—to display along with their Germanic élan a rather 'British' talent for improvisation and obstinacy in refusing to bow to overwhelming odds.
[214] Connelly, *We Can Take It!*, p. 55; Edwards, 'D-Day in British Memory', in Dolski, Edwards and Buckley (eds.), *D-Day in History and Memory*, pp. 105-6.
[215] Connelly, *We Can Take It!*, p. 220.

That said, it is possible to align the Army's late war operations with the 'People's War', through assessments which view British soldiers as largely passive, with limited tactical agency. This is possible because the dominant historical interpretation of the Army's performance after D-Day has held that it was overly dependent on overwhelming material superiority, firepower and air support, and, crucially, many of the explanations put forward for this are directly linked to British soldiers' competence (or lack thereof compared with the Germans). As David French has noted, 'Most of the unofficial accounts of the campaign manage to imply, without ever stating explicitly, that morale was at best mediocre and in some units downright poor'.[216] Reverential and insufficiently searching official appraisals of the campaign in the immediate aftermath of the war proved easily displaced by more critical assessments from Basil Liddell Hart and Chester Wilmot, both of whom viewed the Allied application of superior firepower as a corrective for the troops' lack of confidence and drive—had the troops performed better, they suggested, victory might have come more quickly and at less cost.[217] The view that the application of overwhelming force was not an intended or desired method, but necessitated by the failings of the front-line troops, has proved a persistent one. Antony Beevor reports that 'An aversion to risk had become widespread and opportunities were seldom exploited…the Second Army in Normandy preferred to rely on the excellent support provided by the Royal Artillery

[216] David French, '"Tommy is no Soldier": The Morale of the Second British Army in Normandy, June-August 1944', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 19/4 (December, 1996), p. 154.
[217] Basil Liddell Hart, *The Other Side of the Hill* (London, 1951); Chester Wilmot, *The Struggle For Europe* (London, 1952). These are assessed in John Buckley, *Monty's Men: The British Army and the Liberation of Europe* (London, 2013), pp. 8-9.

and on Allied air power', while 'Both Canadians and Americans were bemused by the British Army's apparent inability to complete a task without a tea break'.[218] Carlo D'Este writes that 'British infantrymen fought bravely in Normandy but not always to the best advantage…The all-too-frequent end result in battle were situations at the squad level where the men were simply inadequately indoctrinated *not* to wait around for an officer or NCO to tell them what to do next, but to close with the enemy, firing every weapon available and for the next-in-line to take command at once if their leader was hit'.[219] John Ellis argues that 'the British and Canadian armies that went across to fight in Normandy were not finely tuned fighting machines and comparison with their opponents can only be invidious'.[220] Max Hastings, perhaps the most strident critic of the Allied forces and admirer of 'the glory of German arms', complains that 'Some green [British] units seemed slow to treat their task with the absolute commitment necessary', and 'fought superbly, with great bravery, only to lack the last ounce of drive or follow-through necessary to carry an objective or withstand a counter-attack'.[221] Even generally positive assessments which conclude that British soldiers 'learned their trade and became entirely professional' nonetheless acknowledge the Army was 'sometimes ponderous, lacking in élan'.[222]

Because these assessments place importance on the attitude and skill of the front-line soldiers, for veterans they are likely to be of great influence. Revisionist views in

[218] Beevor, *D-Day*, pp. 142, 264.
[219] Carlo D'Este, *Decision in Normandy: The Unwritten Story of Montgomery and the Allied Campaign* (London, 1983), p. 284. Original emphasis.
[220] John Ellis, *Brute Force: Allied Strategy and Tactics in the Second World War* (London, 1990), p. 382.
[221] Max Hastings, *Overlord: D-Day and the Battle for Normandy 1944* (London, 1984), pp. 211, 371; Max Hastings, *All Hell Let Loose: The World at War 1939-1945* (London, 2011), p. 541.
[222] David Fraser, *And We Shall Shock Them: The British Army in the Second World War* (London, 1983), p. 397.

academic[223] and popular[224] works have gained traction, but the critical school remains influential among a mainstream readership, not least because the works of Hastings, D'Este and others remain popular and easily found on bookshop shelves, as they surely will be for some time yet. These works are likely to be particularly influential on veterans, who evidently take a greater than average interest in the history of the war in which they fought: it is common for interviews to digress into discussions of books and authors, and Hastings and Beevor are mentioned by name.[225] If one can attribute the deficiencies of British soldiers to inadequate training and poor leadership, it remains the case that veterans seem to have little to be proud of. This is likely to encourage giving a generally negative assessment, and many appear to have taken the questionable performance of the British Army as the vital context for their testimony. Indeed, Robin Neillands expressed alarm at the impact on veterans of the apparent denigration and belittling of the British effort in Normandy:

> Talking to British veterans—a dwindling number—it is clear that this steady erosion of their war from the public conscience, even in Britain, is causing them anger and distress. More and more of the general public, in Britain as well as the USA…are clearly unaware that the British and Canadians fought in Normandy at all.[226]

One cannot, of course, suggest that those who read about the war are the same as those who know nothing about it, but many of the public are likely to occupy a middle

[223] French, *Raising Churchill's Army*; Stephen A. Hart, *Montgomery and "Colossal Cracks": The 21st Army Group in Northwest Europe, 1944-5* (Westport, CT, 2000); Buckley, *Monty's Men*.
[224] Robin Neillands, *The Battle for Normandy 1944* (London, 2002); Ben Kite, *Stout Hearts: The British and Canadians in Normandy 1944* (Solihull, 2014).
[225] Procter, 2, 06-07; Partridge, 1, 46-47; Majendie, 1, 43-45, 83-84; Gregg, 2, 139-153; Mayman, 2, 21-28.
[226] Neillands, *Battle for Normandy*, p. 21.

ground—having picked up negative ideas about the British Army in the Second World War through hearsay or popular culture without ever reading a book on the subject.

Although, as will be seen, most veterans are quite willing to dispute what they see as misconceptions, there is nonetheless little in the popular literature or popular culture to support the notion that the average British soldier, albeit dependable and often courageous, was anything more than competent. As John Ellis argues, the Army in Normandy 'exhibited the most notable characteristic of the British soldier, a bloody-minded capacity to endure when the chips were really down and when sheer grit was at a premium rather than flair and tactical suppleness in a fast-moving situation'.[227] Incapable of matching the Germans' superior professionalism and improvisational skill, the British soldier is held to have been capable of *enduring* the enemy's fire, but rarely of directly *defeating* him. In this respect the major historiographical trend, although not directly informed by the People's War myth, matches with it rather neatly.

Discourses of Veterancy and Victimhood

Another important influence on veterans' testimony is what it means to be a veteran, an identity which has shifted since the Second World War mainly due to new ideas about trauma. The factual basis for understanding trauma, and its ramifications for analysing the testimony, are discussed in Chapter Five, but here the concern is with how subjective conceptions of trauma provide further discourses which mediate veterans' accounts. The general trend has been towards viewing soldiers primarily as

[227] Ellis, *Brute Force*, p 383.

victims in a general understanding of war as unreservedly awful, wasteful and pointless. As Richard Bessell has noted,

> the trend in recent historical research, like that in the public sphere, has been to view war in terms of the violence it embodies and the destruction, both mental and physical, that it leaves in its wake. The history of war in Europe has become, in large measure, a history of its victims—and just about everyone has come to be counted among the victims of war.[228]

This was not so much the case during the Second World War, when soldiers derived more prestige from patriotic notions of serving the nation and combatants in particular 'were represented as occupying a higher point in the masculine hierarchy':[229] 'To be manly in wartime…was to be a combatant'.[230] If the psychiatric consequences of war were better understood and attitudes were softening, receiving treatment for such conditions was still stigmatised.[231] Today, patriotism and masculinity remain sources of prestige for soldiers, but wartime trauma is also a source of prestige, not only because war is now understood in terms of its victims, but also because, impelled by identity politics and amid concerns about correcting societal injustices, victimhood has become increasingly regarded as virtuous. In this way, Alistair Thomson identified new discourses appearing in the 1980s which accepted soldiers could be victims as crucial to allowing certain of his Anzac interviewees to achieve composure and speak about the First World War.[232]

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[228] Richard Bessell, 'Violence and Victimhood: Looking Back at the World Wars in Europe', in Echternkamp and Martens (eds.), *Experience and Memory*, p. 231. See also Edgar Jones and Simon Wessely, *Shell Shock to PTSD: Military Psychiatry from 1900 to the Gulf War* (Hove, 2005), pp. 134, 138, 173, 184-6, 212; Joanna Bourke, *Fear: A Cultural History* (London, 2005), pp. 374, 379-80.
[229] Summerfield, 'Culture and Composure', p. 71.
[230] Pattinson, 'British Civilian Masculinity', p. 709.
[231] Ben Shephard, *A War of Nerves* (London, 2000), p. 325.
[232] Thomson, *Anzac Memories*, pp. 212-214.

The aftermath of the Second World War has been identified by some as the point at which attitudes began to change,[233] but the most profound shift occurred due to the Vietnam War and the recognition of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: 'More than any other war in history, Vietnam redefined the social role of psychiatry and society's perception of mental health…help[ing] to create a new "consciousness of trauma" in Western society', so that by 2000 'it was becoming clear that enormous changes in social values since the Second World War had redefined the role of emotion and stress in Anglo-Saxon public culture'—resulting in what has been labelled 'trauma culture',[234] and a view of soldiers as disillusioned 'victim-veterans'.[235] In Britain specifically, the Falklands War can be attributed with bringing issues of trauma to the attention of the public and the armed forces.[236] Military psychiatry became 'part of a burgeoning socio-medical movement' which sought to understand the consequences of various types of trauma throughout society, and vital to this was the fact PTSD was defined as universal reaction, which could strike anyone, at any time after trauma took place, and did not, as previously, imply pre-existing weakness in character or psychology.[237] Reassessments of the Holocaust also allowed trauma to be re-visualised as something which could have a delayed effect on entire groups of people.[238] Related to Vietnam, this 'allowed veterans to be viewed as another group of victims of an insane and unjust war'.[239] As Edgar Jones and Simon Wessely state, 'Vietnam and PTSD both reflected

[233] Bessell, 'Violence and Victimhood', in Echternkamp and Martens (eds.), *Experience and Memory*, p. 230.
[234] Shephard, *War of Nerves*, pp. 356, 396.
[235] Lembcke, 'War Trauma', p. 49; Harari, 'Martial Illusions', pp. 46-7.
[236] Shephard, *War of Nerves*, pp. 378-81.
[237] Ibid., p. 385; Simon Wessely, 'Twentieth-Century Theories on Combat Motivation and Breakdown', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 41/2 (2006), p. 281-2.
[238] Shephard, *War of Nerves*, pp. 359-61.
[239] Jones and Wessely, *Shell Shock to PTSD*, p. 211.

and fuelled a growing preoccupation with trauma in general, and its victims in particular', so that 'From a position of advocating or admiring resilience and/or reticence, western values have shifted to encouraging and valuing emotional display or vulnerability'.[240] Idealistic heroics, by contrast, declined in merit, so that:

> Many believe that, since Vietnam, it is harder to commemorate gallantry and victory or to suppress individual subjectivities at the expense of collective ones. Thus delineations of victims—from Vietnam, from the AIDS epidemic, from racism, from child abusers, from rapists, from drugs, even from World War II—now command more cultural space. Statements of what was lost now eclipse expressions of what was gained.[241]

In an increasingly post-modern society, Patrick J. Bracken maintains, 'all ideas come up for question, all identities are a matter of personal choice', and the social frameworks which organised people's lives decline; the result is that 'current thinking about trauma is guided by an individualist and positivist agenda', in which PTSD is seen as a universal syndrome applicable to numerous groups in society.[242] As attitudes to trauma have shifted, and war and trauma have become ever more intrinsically linked, trauma has become strongly associated with veterancy, not as an unusual reaction affecting a minority of vulnerable individuals, but a near-inevitable consequence of military service, so that 'in the post-9/11 wars psychological injuries have taken centre stage in the ways we talk about, digest, and engage with war and

[240] Ibid., pp. 173, 186, 212; Wessely, 'Combat Motivation and Breakdown', p. 286; Shephard, *War of Nerves*, pp. 361, 397.
[241] John Bodnar, '*Saving Private Ryan* and Postwar Memory in America', in Martel (ed.), *The World War Two Reader*, p. 437.
[242] Patrick J. Bracken, 'Post-Modernity and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder', *Social Science and Medicine*, 53 (2001), pp. 740-1.

its consequences',[243] and therefore 'one could be forgiven for thinking PTSD is the main mental health problem facing the modern military'.[244]

The end result of these developments has been to produce a triangular relationship between the three factors of veterancy, victimhood, and trauma. Veterancy is linked via combat to trauma, and trauma is commonly linked to victimhood;[245] this means veterancy too is linked to victimhood. The effect is to marginalise experiences which do not accord with all three criteria. It is problematic to be an active participant in violence and traumatised, since trauma is associated with victimhood, so for veterans this can be an important reason to downplay their agency in combat, particularly involvement in killing, and instead present themselves as passive victims. It is also problematic to be a veteran who has been 'victimised' by enduring combat but has escaped psychological damage: in oral history part of achieving composure is to search for evidence of traumatic experiences, potentially resulting in 'a gradual "inflation" of traumatic memories', because in the popular view it is scarcely possible to be a combat veteran who has not been traumatised.[246] The presumption of trauma invites certain responses: in this way Alistair Thomson's interviewee Fred Farrall came to regard all his problems as stemming from the First World War, although 'there's every chance that Fred's peace was as damaging to his mental health as his war'.[247] These themes are returned to in Chapter Five.

[243] Sarah Hautzinger and Jean Scandlyn, *Beyond Post-Traumatic Stress: Home Front Struggles with the War on Terror* (Walnut Creek, CA, 2014), p. 16.
[244] Jones and Wessely, *Shell Shock to PTSD*, p. 184.
[245] Lindsey Dodd, '"It did not traumatise me at all": Childhood "Trauma" in French Oral Narratives of Wartime Bombing', *Oral History*, 41/2 (Autumn, 2013), pp. 40.
[246] Jones and Wessely, *Shell Shock to PTSD*, p. 134.
[247] Thomson, '*Anzac Memories* Revisited', p. 17.

In the 2010s, although warrior figures provide attractive archetypes for knowingly unrealistic films and video games, soldiers are rarely subject to serious assessments that stress their skill as fighters. Combat is envisioned as an impersonal, elemental occurrence, akin to a natural disaster, which can only be endured, not controlled. Victorious soldiers, who happen, apparently by chance, to find themselves on the winning side, are now thought just as likely to be damaged by war as the defeated enemy or civilians caught in the crossfire. The virtuous aspect of soldiering is not righteously meting out violence but simply surviving combat and the ensuing trauma. In many ways such discourses now provide the lens through which the Second World War is viewed. It is very much consistent with these that *Dunkirk* (2017), which was widely hailed for its authenticity in portraying 'real' war, involves the soldiers taking no hostile action towards the enemy but merely doing their best to evade his attacks and escape—summed up by the tag-line 'Survival is Victory'. In this way popular discourses around soldiering have aligned with the People's War; both emphasise largely passive endurance in the face of aggression, and therefore they can coexist with relative ease.

Although *Dunkirk* is curiously sanitised, there is also a relation here to the way the violent realities of war are now more widely recognised in popular culture. War films such as *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), *Fury* (2014), and *Hacksaw Ridge* (2017), television series such as *Band of Brothers* (2001) and *The Pacific* (2010), and a host video games have become ever more 'ghoulishly forthright'[248] in their depictions of violent and traumatic battle, all of which emphasises the perceived heroism of those

[248] Holmes, *Acts of War*, p. 5.

who survived such ordeals—'the fact that combat was so frightening serves mainly to reinforce our admiration for these soldiers and their gallantry'.[249] Steven Spielberg was motivated to produce *Saving Private Ryan* after hearing from veterans that they did not recognise cinematic depictions of their war. The assumptions implicit in this are that realism is a worthwhile goal, since veterans deserve to have their stories told accurately, and that veterans are authoritative on their own experience—these two ideas underpin much war-related filmmaking, history-writing and, of course, oral history. *Saving Private Ryan* was hailed by many for its realism, but the realism here is not in the literal accuracy of the circumstances depicted but in the film's acknowledgement of bloody violence, which is held to be a general truth of all wars—curiously allowing US Air Force veterans of the Gulf War, whose experiences cannot possibly have resembled the landings on Omaha Beach, to attest with presumed authority to the film's realism.[250] In fact, in emphasising the truth of the violent parts of war, *Saving Private Ryan* arguably conceals the greater truth that most experiences of Army service in the Second World War were mundane rather than violent. However, its brand of authenticity is in keeping with the views of war, trauma and veterancy which came about in the aftermath of Vietnam.

It is perhaps indicative of the previously mentioned reluctance to acknowledge violent combat in the Second World War in British memory that these representations are mostly American; it is notable that there is no British counterpoint to *Saving Private Ryan* or *Band of Brothers*, although equivalent British representations do deal with the

[249] Bodnar, '*Saving Private Ryan*', in Martel (ed.), *World War Two Reader*, p. 436.
[250] Toby Haggith, 'Realism, Historical Truth and the War Film: The Case of *Saving Private Ryan*', in Paris (ed.), *Repicturing the Second World War*, pp. 178-9.

First World War. This difference in focus does not dispute the larger fact that war and soldiering have become ever more intrinsically associated with trauma and victimhood throughout Western culture, but does indicate the ways in which similar discourses can vary in their interactions with different national myths. This may be illustrated by comparing the situation in Britain with that in the United States. Although the source of the modern attitude to trauma, there is still much more space in American memory for patriotic wartime heroism; the notion of the 'Greatest Generation', continues to be extremely persistent and has only recently begun to be challenged. According to this interpretation the generation of Americans who lived through the Second World War and its aftermath demonstrated a sense of patriotism and shared duty unmatched by any other generation before or since.[251] For Americans D-Day in particular 'represented willing sacrifice and military strength in a "Great Crusade" to vanquish evil, save the world, and launch the American century. These democratic heroes of D-Day then returned home, made America great, and became the "Greatest Generation" as a result.'[252] Implicit in this view is the image of American soldiers as righteous, heroic warriors, an image which was promoted during the war by propaganda which aimed at 'keeping the public ignorant (in the name of morale) of the appalling realities of combat'.[253] The Vietnam War demolished the notion of American soldiers being heroes fighting for a just cause, but by comparison with later wars the Second World War has appeared even more the quintessential 'good war', more morally justified and more heroic.

[251] Kenneth D. Rose, *Myth and the Greatest Generation* (New York, 2008), pp. 1-3.
[252] Michael Dolski, Sam Edwards and John Buckley, 'Conclusion', in Dolski, Edwards and Buckley (eds.), *D-Day in History and Memory*, p. 259.
[253] Rose, *Greatest Generation*, p. 45.

In Kenneth D. Rose's critique of the 'Greatest Generation' myth, it is striking to note that the 'realities' behind many aspects of the American myth resemble British popular memory very closely. He notes that there was little evidence of patriotism in the wartime US military: 'The patriotism that supposedly dominated American life during World War II is mostly of the hindsight variety', and it was only 'With the passage of sixty years [that] the young serviceman sceptical of patriotic appeals has become the old, aggressively patriotic veteran'.[254] Scepticism of outward displays of patriotism, although harbouring a quiet, dignified love of 'Blighty', is an aspect of the British national character frequently attributed to the wartime generation, seen to form a link between past and present, even though it seems that wartime Britain was in reality much more overtly patriotic than it is today. Rose further explains that ideological motives appeared to matter little to American soldiers, as most seem to have treated their service as a job, and taken more pride in the quality of their performance than the reasons they were doing it.[255] In this vein, Arthur Schlesinger Jr. notes that '[the Greatest Generation] was like most other generations in American history. It consisted of plain people who, confronted by moral threats to their country, accepted their duty and performed it laconically, modestly, self-effacingly, without show, without flourish'.[256] These assessments could be transferred with next to no alteration into a description of present-day British popular memory. It is unclear whether in the British case the popular memory has shifted in the opposite direction to the American case—working over time to downplay rather than exaggerate patriotism—or whether it has

[254] Ibid., p. 5.
[255] Ibid., pp. 61-5.
[256] Arthur Schlesinger Jr., 'The Rediscovery of World War II', *AARP Bulletin* (May 1999), p. 22, cited in Rose, *Greatest Generation*, p. 258.

proven more stable, and Britain was simply less patriotic in the first place. It may be instructive to note the opinion of two influential contemporary observers: 'American and British soldiers tend to consider their wartime service as a disagreeable necessity, as a task which had to be performed because there were no alternatives'.[257] It may be that the immediacy of the threat posed to Britain itself, and the more obvious necessity of defeating Nazi Germany, obviated the need to evoke patriotic or moral motives for participating in the war, compared with the more isolated United States. Whatever the case, the idea of the war as a moral crusade seems today rarely to be as overtly articulated in Britain as in the United States, and this in part explains why American veterans are more often the subject of heroic depictions in popular cultural productions. The British soldier is more usually portrayed as 'heroic precisely because of his unheroic nature',[258] in terms of the understated character which is held as representative not only of the Army but the entire British nation in the People's War.

Summary: Popular Memory and the British Army in the Second World War

It can be seen that the People's War, the popular historiography and discourses around veterancy provide relatively complementary discourses through which the British Army in 1944-5 is popularly assessed. D-Day is remembered as a magnificent feat of arms, but at the same time the way that the British Army's battlefield performance has been denigrated, and discourses around soldiering have increasingly characterised veterans as passive victims rather than active fighters, permit those aspects of the British national character perceived as crucial for surviving the dark days of 1940 to be

[257] Edward A. Shils and Morris Janowitz, 'Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 12 (Summer, 1948), p. 292.
[258] Connelly, *We Can Take It!*, p. 203.

transferred to the soldiers of 1944-5. British soldiers are seen to embody the same characteristics which, according to the 'People's War' myth, allowed the nation to weather the storm during Dunkirk, the Battle of Britain and the Blitz, and thereby lay the foundation for the eventual defeat of Nazi Germany by enduring, quietly and stoically, refusing to 'make a fuss', demonstrating 'stiff upper lip', and tackling an unpleasant but necessary job with resigned determination, though without much panache. A relatively stable set of discourses is therefore available through which, as per the theory of composure, British veterans can articulate their war narratives. The ways these discourses shape the veterans' testimony is the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter 3
Popular Memory and Composure

This chapter will assess the impact of the popular discourses assessed in the previous chapter on the veterans' narratives. The current field of oral history can be criticised for focussing too much on the in-depth analysis of oral testimony's (retrospectively) subjective aspects, work which really constitutes memory studies, and too little on employing it in historical interpretations. Nonetheless, the former task is an essential preliminary for the latter. This and the next chapter will examine the ways in which the interviewees formulated their testimony through the process of composure. Processes of composure are evident throughout the interviews, usually intertwined with various narrative techniques. Most of the accounts contain a central 'argument' or moral, sometimes overt and sometimes more subtle, which serves to highlight what each individual regards as the main features or themes of his war experience. The accounts, along with the processes of composure which produce them, are therefore highly individual.

Popular memory has long been regarded as one of the main influences on composure; undoubtedly respondents align their accounts according to popular representations of the events they experienced, and if this is impossible, they may be inhibited from speaking altogether. There has been space, however, to reassess the way popular memory is understood. In particular, several historians have worked to restate the importance of individual cognition in the face of what is perceived as an overextension of the theory of collective memory. As Jay Winter explains, 'One of the unfortunate features of the memory boom is the tendency of commentators to term any and every

narrative of past events as constituents of national memory or collective memory', wherein cultural representations such as films are held to 'remember'.[259] For this reason he avoids the term 'collective memory' and maintains that popular representations do not dictate personal memory, but cause people to 'restructure and fortify' historical ideas which they themselves brought to the occasion; he calls this more complex process 'historical remembrance'.[260]

Anna Green has likewise criticised the overemphasis on collective memory, also pointing out the curious situation that 'all forms of historical understanding are increasingly classified as memory', and arguing that a paradox has resulted—how can collective memory, aggregated from individual memories, be concerted and 'permitted a high degree of intentionality' if those individual memories are themselves unconscious and aimless, with no power to dispute collective memory?[261] As people are exposed to a large number of conflicting beliefs and values, and only some are incorporated into individual memory, must there not be some individual agency at work?[262] Moreover, Green argues, an overemphasis on cultural discourses can lead to a 'reductionist' approach whereby complex and contradictory accounts are forced into narrow categories determined *a priori* by previously identified discourses;[263] this can be seen in Gabriele Rosenthal's study of German war memory, which uses a range of accounts not to stress the variety of possible war experiences but to underpin generalisations which conflate the experiences of every German soldier in the world

[259] J.M. Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War Between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century* (London, 2006), pp. 183-4.
[260] Ibid., pp. 4, 199.
[261] Green, 'Individual Remembering and "Collective Memory"', p. 37.
[262] Green, 'Can Memory be Collective?', in Ritchie (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, p. 105.
[263] Green, 'Individual Remembering and "Collective Memory"', p. 39.

wars according to seemingly predetermined ideas.[264] 'In practice', Green concludes, 'individual and collective memories are often in tension…oral historians need to re-assert the value of individual remembering, and the capacity of the conscious self to contest and critique cultural scripts or discourses.'[265] In the same way, Michael Roper has complained of the tendency of popular memory to downplay 'the range of possible personal motivations for remembering', and called for more attention to be devoted especially to subconscious emotional impulses.[266]

This study recognises these criticisms and argues that popular memory only exists in so far as it is the agglomeration of individual acts of remembrance, and that individual circumstances are always of prime importance in the production of memory. The point here is that individuals always make decisions over how far to reflect popular memory. If popular memory is an important influence on how non-participants come to understand the past, and participants voluntarily refer to popular memory, the idea that it can hegemonically dictate individual remembering is much more doubtful. In this and the next chapter, it will be suggested that overt references to popular representations are fairly rare; rather, popular memory provides the boundary limitations for discussing the war. As Lindsey Dodd notes, 'the public version of events act like a jelly mould, shaping personal memories to its contours'.[267] Within the 'mould' of popular memory, however, most of the war narratives are in fact highly

[264] Rosenthal, 'German War Memories', pp. 34-41.
[265] Green, 'Individual Remembering and "Collective Memory"', pp. 41-42; Green, 'Can Memory be Collective?', in Ritchie (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, p. 108.
[266] Michael Roper, 'Re-Remembering the Soldier Hero: The Psychic and Social Construction of Memory in Personal Narratives of the Great War', *History Workshop Journal*, 50 (Autumn, 2000), pp. 184, 199.
[267] Lindsey Dodd, 'Small Fish, Big Pond: Using a Single Oral History Narrative to Reveal Broader Social Change', in Tumblety (ed.), *Memory and History*, p. 37.

personalised, influenced to a far greater extent by individual character and outlook than by any shared conception of the past.

The People's War and Composure

Although the veterans' accounts reflect multiple influences, only one of which is the British popular myth of the Second World War, some features clearly derive directly from the People's War. Hereward Wake provides an account which clearly borrows extensively from the myth, intermingled with his own faith:

> I want everybody to know, that our Christian faith played an important part...[9] We were fighting evil against the terrible behaviour [of] the Nazis. We would never be beaten. And I will say now straight away, that we were inspired of course continuously by Churchill and his speeches, we were inspired by Monty when he eventually joined us, previous to that we had poor leadership at the top...[6] and we were inspired by our faith in Christ.[268]

This example references aspects of wartime propaganda—the demonization of the Nazis, Churchill's rhetoric of defiance, and the way Montgomery was solely attributed with reviving the Army's fortunes—with unusual clarity. Robert Ford provides similarly conventional reasons for fighting, although he focusses less on moral motives and more on patriotically defending the homeland from outside aggression:

> ML: And how did you motivate yourself and your crew? How do you keep going?
>
> RF: Well I'll tell you, it's a very different war from all these wars that go on now. We were fighting for the survival of our home country. We were surviving for our wives, girlfriends, mothers and fathers, who were living in England, and we all knew, if we lost the war, Germany would occupy us, and that would be-, that would be impossible, intolerable, and so, the...the morale and the need to do it was in- borne in us, really...And,

[268] Wake, 1, 08-09.

> we never questioned whether we were doing the right thing, or doing it at all, never, not at my level anyway, which was very young. No, what we wanted to do was get on with it and win it...put it bluntly.[269]

It may not be coincidental that both these retellings of the popular myth come from upper-class officers.

Most references to the popular myth are more subtle and nuanced than these, however. For instance, some deference to the apparently more important role played by other services, especially the RAF, in the 'backs to the wall' period of 1940 is evident. An especially clear example appears in the account of Geoff Young. Although Lucas prompts him to talk about the preparations for D-Day, Young instead discusses the threatened German invasion of Great Britain:

> ML: When did you first think about the invasion? When was it getting obvious that something big was going to happen?
>
> GY: Well, it was very-, of course we went down to the south-east coast you see, and we were there as a front-line troops then. And...it was very edgy, because we had one chap taken away from...a German E-Boat came in and captured one of our chaps. And of course, it's all in my book actually, that was a bit of a shock. Yes, we were very apprehensive then. Luckily the air force saved us that time, as you know, Battle of Britain, they saved us, but then don't forget, the Merchant Navy also saved us, and that was, I think a fantastic-, they had some fantastic people, the merchant sailors, and of course in the Navy as well. So don't think we done everything![270]

Young establishes the threat posed by the Germans, capable of landing on the British coast where and when they wished, and the fact that it was the air force and navy which 'saved' the country. This extract comes directly after Young remarks on the high quality of his division, 43rd (Wessex); it can be interpreted as bringing this

[269] Ford, 3, 51-52.
[270] Young, 1, 03-04.

sentiment into agreement with the popular memory, assuring the listener that if the Army was highly capable, this should not be taken to imply that he disputes the war-winning role played by the other services. Similarly, Harry Askew recalls the death of a fellow trainee during a Luftwaffe bombing, which likewise aligns his war with the threat posed to Britain itself.[271] Two others, Eric Tipping and Stan Procter, both formerly of 1st Worcesters, report that they initially volunteered to be (specifically *fighter*) pilots; curiously, they are also the only two Worcesters to mention later observing aerial combat in the skies over Nijmegen, perhaps referencing popular notions of the importance of the air war.[272] Ray Gordon also recalls trying to join the RAF, while Denis Laws notes that he was motivated to enlist by his brother's RAF service.[273] Evidently the way that the Army occupied a less prestigious role than the air force has influenced some of the accounts.

Overall, though, there is little outright deference to the popular myth of the People's War. As discussed in the previous chapter, according to the People's War the entire nation was perceived to have united and every individual to have 'done their bit', and as a result veterans are perceived—and therefore, to some extent, perceive themselves—to have done their patriotic duty in a similar manner to the civilians in the Blitz. Yet, while the veterans do not overtly question the popular myth, nor do most actively validate it. If soldiers' and civilians' experiences are conflated in the People's War, the interviewees do not appear to blithely endorse this; instead, they refashion their memories to produce distance between the military and civilian

[271] Askew, 1, 18-19.
[272] Tipping, 1, 02, 27-29; Procter, 1, 00, 17-18.
[273] Gordon, 1, 00; Laws, 2, 00-01.

spheres. Throughout the interviews the concept of 'doing one's bit' is only ever invoked in relation to enlistment, not to Army service once the interviewee had made the transition from civilian to soldier. Often this is done with a sardonic sense of irony, or to imply an image of youthful naïvety.[274] This is striking because 'doing one's bit' has been identified as a major theme in testimony drawn from comparable groups such as Home Guard members and war workers;[275] indeed, one of Corinna Peniston-Bird's interviewees associated wartime unity with his Home Guard service rather than his later Army service, 'underlining the symbolic meaning of a force set up specifically to defend the home and a nation united to thwart the enemy'.[276] In defiance of probability, none of this study's interviewees mention involvement with the Home Guard prior to their Army service. On the one occasion it is referenced, the aim is to denigrate it by drawing on the humorous image presented in popular culture—'Dad's Army looks like professionals compared to what we were'—emphasising the amateurish nature of training in order to illustrate the quality of that individual's unit by the time it actually saw action.[277] This is only one example of testimony which aims not to align the experiences of the various participants in the People's War in order to validate the popular image of national unity, but rather to separate them.

To emphasise the implied gulf between the experiences of soldiers and civilians, Britain and the Home Front are rarely mentioned, even though it is evident, both from the

[274] Partridge, 1, 01; Tout, 1, 09-10; Young, 1, 01.
[275] Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives*; Summerfield and Peniston-Bird, *Contesting Home Defence*; Juliette Pattinson, Arthur McIvor and Linsey Robb, *Men in Reserve: British Civilian Masculinities in the Second World War* (Manchester, 2017); Peniston-Bird, 'Patriotism and the 'People's War'', pp. 69-70, 72.
[276] Ibid., p. 72.
[277] Spittles, 1, 44.

interviews and broader historical research, that maintaining connections with the home front by sending letters and parcels was extremely important in the maintenance of morale and something to which almost all soldiers devoted a great deal of their time.[278] Parents, wives, girlfriends, and children are mentioned in passing, if at all. Where they do appear in the story, it is usually to illustrate a transferral back to the civilian world: leave, demobilisation, or medical evacuation to Britain.[279] The general impression is that the Army stood apart from the rest of British society; its experience was not that of the rest of the nation, even if articulated in the same terms of endurance. The veterans stress individual experience, or the experience of their unit, over collective national effort; if they look back with nostalgia, it is to stress unity and camaraderie in their regiment rather than in wider British society. There is, in oral history terminology, a silence on one of the central tenets of the People's War.

Partially, the rhetorical distance this creates between Britain and the fighting front can be attributed to wartime perceptions of the home front as 'an essentially feminine place, embodying in the soldier's mind all the supposed evils of women';[280] a false but persistent impression existed and continues to exist that there were no young men on the home front.[281] Yet it is also a striking rejection of the popular memory's tendency to subsume the Army's experience under the civilianised interpretation of the People's War. Although they broadly validate the popular memory, the veterans' identities

[278] Majendie, 1, 38-40; Beach, 1, 12-13; Hutchinson, 3, 14-15, 62-63; Jonathan Fennell, *Combat and Morale in the North African Campaign: The Eighth Army and the Path to El Alamein* (Cambridge, 2011), pp. 151-187.
[279] Freeman, 1, 47-49; Mayman, 2, 12-14. Similarly, Federico Lorenz remarks that Argentinean veterans of the Falklands War refer to Argentina as 'the Continent' 'which thus added psychological to geographical isolation': Lorenz, 'The Unending War: Social Myth, Individual Memory and the Malvinas', in Rogers and Leydesdorff (eds.), *Trauma*, p. 102.
[280] Allport, *Browned Off*, p. 293.
[281] Pattinson, 'British Civilian Masculinity', p. 710.

subtly undermine it by establishing distance and difference between soldiers and civilians. This ensures that their experiences and achievements can be appreciated in their own right both by the veterans and their audience. Whereas most British people align the Army's wartime activities with a larger united effort, the veterans attempt to present an identity separate from the universalising People's War myth which holds that all Britons, civilian and military, were 'all in it together'.

Evidently, the influence of popular memory can be limited, especially where it comes into conflict with personal recollections or the collective memory of subgroups like veterans. The veterans prefer to stress the uniqueness of Army service rather than wholeheartedly align their memories with the People's War. This brings into question the idea in oral history theory that there exists a dichotomy between happy composure, supported by popular memory, which allows respondents to speak, and unhappy discomposure, not supported by popular memory, which causes repression and silences. Previous assessments have maintained that individuals can draw upon certain aspects of public discourse only by ignoring aspects which are unrepresentative of their experience. For example, Alistair Thomson suggested that after achieving composure, one of his Anzac interviewees 'was so pleased with the new recognition that he did not always see that other aspects of his experience were still ignored or denied by the legend…affirmation may be essential for individual peace of mind, but in the process contradictory and challenging memories are displaced or repressed'.[282] It seems possible, however, that respondents draw upon discourses which, even

[282] Alistair Thomson, 'Anzac Memories: Putting Popular Memory Theory into Practice in Australia', in Perks and Thomson (eds.), *Oral History Reader*, p. 253.

though they do not perfectly reflect their experiences, are considered 'good enough', that they may be quite conscious of this, and that this does not necessitate repressing or forgetting memories which dissent from the received wisdom. After all, popular discourses are a way for individuals to relate stories to their audience; they need not *supplant* personal memory. In this way, more recent theorising has suggested that a simple dichotomy between composure and discomposure is insufficiently nuanced. Thomson himself has reassessed his original research and acknowledged the process is a more complex one in which 'composure is never fully achieved'.[283]

Enlistment, Patriotism and Composure

Corinna Peniston-Bird has explored the complexity of composure by assessing an aspect of British Second World War memory which has declined: the notion of wartime patriotism. Popular memory not only suggests frameworks for remembering—like 'doing one's bit'—but makes some frameworks problematic. Peniston-Bird argues that while patriotism was quite widespread during the Second World War, 'the role of patriotism as a motivating factor for service was much more problematic for composure in today's context', and 'Unlike 'doing your bit', patriotism has come to have different connotations in the contemporary context'.[284] It is difficult in the 21st Century to explain how love of one's country and societal expectations could provide sufficient motivation for military service. The Home Guard volunteers which Peniston-Bird assesses, she notes, find it much easier to invoke 'doing one's bit' rather than patriotism when fashioning their wartime identities. Discomposure when the subject

[283] Thomson, '*Anzac Memories* Revisited', pp. 17-23.
[284] Peniston-Bird, 'Patriotism and the People's War', pp. 71, 73-5.

of patriotism appears can be instructive, however, as it 'provides a powerful indicator to the historian that the topic under discussion is one in which there may be a mismatch between individual experience and popular discourse'.[285]

Similar effects are observable in the veterans' recollections of enlisting, in which they must explain how they came to be in the unenviable situation of fighting a war. Naturally, conscripts need not cite any reason for enlisting, and if they were patriotically enthused at being called up they rarely state this. However, the fact of wartime conscription means that even Army veterans who volunteered have little difficulty finding adequate 'causality'[286] to explain their enlistment. Although it may be difficult for a veteran to acknowledge patriotism as a motivation—they were not merely making a pragmatic and ultimately hypothetical commitment to defend their own homes, but accepting a very real risk of death or injury, potentially overseas—they can find alternative ways to explain their decisions. Geoff Young volunteered in 1939 after a recruitment drive by the local territorial unit:

> ML: So what made you join up, what...what was the motivation?
>
> GY: Well because, you see, I wanted to get in and have a little bit of interest before I done my six months national service, you see. That's all the reason I was going-, 'cos my two mates were older than me and I wanted to be with them, you see. And my brother also was there.[287]

Young emphasises a desire to 'do his bit' along with his peers, and avoids citing patriotism. In the case of Bill Edwardes too, 'doing one's bit' is sufficient justification for his decision to pre-empt conscription:

[285] Ibid., p. 71
[286] Linde, *Life Stories*, pp. 220-2.
[287] Young, 1, 01.

> ...and I said to mother, 'I've taken the King's shilling', and she knew what I meant, and she said, 'You're mad, you don't have to do it for another year, why have you done it?', and she reminded me afterwards that I said, well I thought it could be all over before I had a chance to join in. I was keen to join in.[288]

Even those who left secure reserved occupations to volunteer can downplay the potentially problematic matter of individual agency in their decision. In explaining his enlistment, Doug Mayman satisfies the wartime discourse of 'doing one's bit' as well as the modern scepticism about military service:

> ML: Doug, could I ask how you...came to be in the army in the first place?
>
> DM: Yes indeed, fairly simply, I could have avoided being in the army, because I was in a reserved occupation in munitions. However...I...decided that I couldn't be...a coward, I suppose, and miss the whole of the war...and whilst I didn't fancy being shot at, I didn't volunteer for the army, but I did the reverse, I did not, although instructed by my superiors, did not register to have a reserved occupation and miss the war, so I was called up in the normal way, and received my call-up papers and joined the army...as a con-, a conscript.[289]

Mayman is careful to note that he did not directly volunteer, implying that truly it was the state which decided he should become a soldier. Patriotism and social pressure to enlist are implied as motives but not fully acknowledged.

Two contrasting accounts of voluntarily enlisting indicate the importance of individual motives for remembering. Bill Partridge has little difficulty negotiating with the idea of patriotism. This may be because he personally regarded himself as a good soldier and

[288] Edwardes, 1, 03.
[289] Mayman, 1, 00-01.

therefore avoided the feeling of many that, on reflection, volunteering seemed an impulsive and naïve mistake.

> ML: Mr Partridge, can I ask by...well can I start by asking how did you come to be in the army in the first place?
>
> BP: I suppose about three reasons. One was that I always had a bit of a hankering after being a soldier, talking to guys who'd fought in the First World War, seeing pictures and books and things. Secondly I was fiercely loyal, your king and country, ridiculously so in those days. And thirdly...there were obviously going to be a war, Hitler was going to go on and you know...conquer the world if he could, there was no doubt about it, and I thought if there was a war I wanted to be in it. And although I was in a reserved occupation that's how I came to be in the Territorials and get called up.[290]

Partridge's first two reasons for enlisting can be explained as belonging to a bygone era, understandable in the context of the time but 'ridiculous' in hindsight. His third reason clearly evokes images of standing up to Nazi aggression which are still very meaningful today, so there is some alignment with popular memory. Partridge therefore has 'sufficient causality'[291] to explain leaving his reserved occupation in agriculture, and by afterwards specifying that he returned to the farm at harvest time,[292] he makes clear that his Army service was a virtuous duty, a chance to 'do his bit', rather than being motivated by less mature desires like escaping from civilian work or seeking adventure. Since he joined the Territorials, it was ultimately the state's decision to send him into action. As Partridge fulfils the relevant discourses his response is clear and confident, and there is no evidence of discomposure.

[290] Partridge, 1, 00-01.
[291] Linde, *Life Stories*, pp. 220-2.
[292] Partridge, 1, 01.

Denis Laws, by contrast, found it more difficult than most to explain why he volunteered for the Army:

> ML: So Denis, you volun-, what made you volunteer as you were in a reserved occupation?
>
> DL: Well...you've got to experience that...I mean...it was almost...everybody of the...eighteen, all your friends were either volunteering or calling up-, called up, and...I mean, you feel isolated, and you wonder what-, later on when you get married and have children, what they're gonna say, 'What did you do in the war Dad?' All you can say is 'I did nothing but...but make things for the army, you know, the forces', so...my brother was in the air force flying Lancasters, and he was coming on leave and we were having a wonderful time, when he came on leave, I thought 'This is a good life this is' [laughs], but you know, you don't look at the-, you don't understand the...[293]

Unlike Partridge, Laws was dissatisfied with his position in the Army, as he became a tradesman doing similar work as he had done as a civilian, so there may be a level of insecurity over his decision to volunteer, which did not pay off as he envisioned. Laws certainly finds his motives difficult to explain in a modern context in which the military life appears unenviable and patriotism and social pressure seem poor reasons to risk life and limb in war, but it is important to note that his discomposure does not cause him to exclude the disorientating section from his narrative, but rather to acknowledge that in later life his perspective has changed. As Peniston-Bird argues, discomposure is not invariably problematic; it is 'revealing of the greatest disjunctures between past and present experiences', and if respondents attempt, sometimes with limited success, to frame their stories in terms of public discourses, 'This is not to argue, however, that

[293] Laws, 2, 00-01.

collective memory or collective amnesia limits the ability of individuals to explore their pasts in the context of the present.'[294]

Ultimately, the veterans are able to acknowledge the extent of wartime patriotism; however, they do this through discourses which are comprehensible by a modern audience. Patriotism is acknowledged to have been a fact of life during the war, although largely disdained in the present. As conscription meant their individual fates were outside their personal control, the veterans can approach the issue of patriotism with more freedom than Peniston-Bird's Home Guard volunteers. They acknowledge patriotism obliquely, by referencing the image of idealistic recruits soon to be shown that their preconceptions of soldiering were naïve, or simply framing it as a fact of life in a bygone era. As Ken Tout states knowingly, 'it was a great adventure, we're serving our country and all the rest of it'.[295] In this way it is possible to acknowledge the differences between past and present. Discomposure over the issue of patriotism does not necessarily lead to silence on the issue, but merely to alternative discourses. There are, it seems, very few issues which cannot be articulated at all; even sentiments which have declined are explicable through a wide range of discourses, not least the versatile idea that the past was a different time.

Popular Memory and the Topical Confines of Veterans' Narratives

Although easy to overlook, perhaps the most important ramification of popular memory is the unspoken understanding that the subject of the interviews is *the war*,

[294] Peniston-Bird, 'Patriotism and the People's War', pp. 71, 78.
[295] Tout, 1, 09-10.

understood as possessing distinct geographical and temporal boundaries. It is not necessarily a given that this be the case: veterans of other, more obscure wars might be more likely to offer broader narratives which contextualise their service in relation to the whole of their lives. Yet this is not necessary where the Second World War is concerned: it is a unanimously understood cultural and historical construction to see the time between the appeasement of Hitler in the late 1930s and Labour's post-war creation of the welfare state as a critical, well-defined and self-contained period in British history.

This may be an important reason why the narratives begin with enlistment into the Army and end with demobilisation. The researcher was, of course, interested in the war, and prompted discussion of training and doctrine in particular, but the interviews were largely unstructured and respondents were free to discuss their broader lives if desired. While some did, few felt a need to explain their background or upbringing before the war in much detail, and nor was later life considered important: Denis Laws, for example, ends his account at the end of the war with the repeated statement, 'That's it. That's my life story'.[296] Where events outside wartime are mentioned, this is generally because there is a specific personal point to be made, not because there is a sense that it is necessary to discuss wider life experiences. Of course, later experiences do influence the veterans' search for composure; it is simply that little impulse is felt to acknowledge these.

[296] Laws, 3, 04, 4, 04.

Likewise, there are geographic boundaries imposed by the popular memory too; while many of the interviewees served in Palestine or various other hotspots of unrest immediately after the end of the war, these are discussed little; the focus is understood to be on the main theatres of North Africa, Italy, Holland, Germany, and, most importantly, Normandy. Thus, after explaining how he was taken out of action in Holland, Ken Tout races through his stay in hospital and his arrival in Palestine at which point he declares 'and that's where I stayed until my number came up to...leave the forces. End of story.'[297] The 'real' war took place in Europe. It is worth reiterating that this temporal and geographic focus should not be taken for granted; the fact that it appears so obvious demonstrates how pervasive a framework it is for understanding the war.

D-Day and Composure

D-Day is seen as the most prominent moment of the 1944-5 campaign. The job of winning the war was seen as nearing completion by 1944: 'All stories need a satisfying conclusion, and for the British, D-Day is just that—a reassuring end to the nation's war story'.[298] The ramification of this for the veterans is to strengthen the notion that after D-Day the war was won, even though really there would be much hard fighting to come. The focus on D-Day as the event which sealed victory turns the subsequent ten months of fighting into something of a foregone conclusion—as Mark Connelly notes, 'the overwhelming sensation is of…a slow, inexorable grind to victory'.[299] It is no surprise, then, that the interviewees attempt to elaborate their role in the early

[297] Tout, 2, 91.
[298] Edwards, 'D-Day in British Memory', p. 119.
[299] Connelly, *We Can Take It!*, p. 220.

stages of the great invasion wherever possible. Descriptions of the landings are never rushed through or cut short; they are important not only in aligning personal experiences with the popular memory of D-Day but also in marking the point at which green soldiers became combatants and, therefore, veterans. Sir Robert Ford articulates the feelings which most of the veterans attach to the landings with more clarity than most:

> ...it was a great moment for all those of us who took part. Whatever happened afterwards, and terrible things happened, and...many of us killed and wounded and one thing another, but that was the...*the* day, we were going to liberate Europe, we were going to defeat the Germans, and we couldn't get on with it quickly enough, and there was no hesitation, anywhere, and it was-, we'd never-, I'd never seen action before, obviously, and in fact none of my crew had, none of-, hardly any, a small element of the regiment had seen action before, very small, that was before Dunkirk...But...it was...had its great moments, I mean it really was something we just thought we had to do, just had to do, and wanted to do, certainly as far as I was concerned, and I think as far as the others were concerned too, most of 'em, too.[300]

The image of the invasion fleet is a well-known one, described by many, and one which Ford also evokes:

> ML: What stands out most in your memories about your time in Normandy, and your time during the war as a whole?
>
> RF: I think D-Day, this incredible morning, dawn, what was it, about half past four? And seeing...so many ships, it was almost unimaginable. I think that stands out clearly...and the landing itself stands out, but then I've talked about it so much of course, that's probably the reason why.[301]

Most of the interviewees' accounts are more prosaic than this, however: Harry Askew provides a representative example:

[300] Ford, 3, 55-57.
[301] Ford, 3, 44-45. See also 24-25.

> ML: And what did you do when you landed?
>
> HA: Well we waded ashore. We had to wade ashore. They were still shelling the beaches, and...we were told to...not line up, you know, but...you couldn't, and that, you got some snipers and some of those as well, where we went up, so we...it was like every man for himself really...
>
> ML: So once you'd got ashore, what were you doing?
>
> HA: Well we tried to find somewhere-, it was night-time, we tried to find somewhere where it was safe, and...the engineers had put tape laying where you mustn't go, and anyway when they finished we set to go through...orchard, yeah. Used to make a little tent with our ground sheets, two of us. We only had one blanket then, well one blanket each, and...no sheets or nothing.[302]

Although this extract appears straightforward, popular discourses are evident nonetheless; Askew mentions the iconic experience of wading through the surf and emphasises the threat posed by German shelling and snipers, while the confusion and his uncomfortable sleeping arrangements symbolise the transition into front-line life. Mike Hutchinson remembers disembarking at Port Winston, the Mulberry harbour established off Arromanches, as a somewhat fraught process:

> ...and then we had to...go up and down, and we had to say, when the...[4] boat came up and down, we had to jump onto the...Mulberry dock and scrabble the best we could along it to get onto the...into France.[303]

Again, arriving in Normandy meant not simply disembarking onto the dock but making the conceptual transition to being on campaign in an occupied country. Others inject a note of humour into their descriptions. Bill Edwardes makes sure to mention his

[302] Askew, 01, 03-04.
[303] Hutchinson, 2, 8.

encounter with one of the beachmasters, who have been represented in films such as *The Longest Day*:[304]

> So off we went across the ocean, coming-...We had to offload the ship in a huge swell, going down rope ladders, quite exciting, and...we'd done all this training before and with the vehicles, our driver was fed up to the teeth with overheating, because the...all the important parts were all waxed up and the exhaust taking...in the air, and we got ashore and as the barge came onto the sand, the gravel, the...the ramp dropped and there was about an inch of water, so we just got the bottoms of the tyres wet. We got onto this ready-made metal road across the beach, wire mesh sort of thing, and our driver stopped, and he said, 'I'm gonna get that bloody stuff off this...distributor cap', and he stopped and got out of the cab, and it was like a voice came, literally, came out of the sky. The beach masters who were buggers, they really were. And...we heard this voice saying, 'Get that fucking thing off my beach!'. [Laughs] So we quickly mounted this cab again and off we went, but...it was quite a welcome to France, 'Get it off my beach!'.[305]

There is also a typical sense of irony in suggesting that the waterproofing measures were unnecessary, a point echoed by Ken Tout and Joe Ekins, who both recall that the 'ghastly' days-long experience of covering every nook and cranny of their tanks with a sticky tar-like substance proved pointless when they went ashore in only eighteen inches of water.[306]

Landing on D-Day, or arriving in Normandy shortly afterwards, provides an opportunity to align personal and popular memory in a way none of the interviewees willingly pass up. Yet where this cannot be done—and many soldiers arrived in France well after the crucial first few days—frustration is expressed. Reg Spittles' armoured regiment landed too late to share in the prestige associated with 6th June, and he is cognizant of the

[304] Connelly, *We Can Take It!*, p. 219.
[305] Edwardes, 1, 13-14.
[306] Tout, 1, 11-12; 2, 00; Ekins, 1, 15.

fact that the attention focussed on D-Day contrasts with the lesser remembrance afforded to the much bloodier battles later in the campaign:

> ...now if you can say 'I landed on D-Day', you're special. You're, forever, you're special. Don't matter what function you're at, if it's a military function, don't matter who you're with, you're special. And then you are, D1, 'Oh, was ya?'. D2, 'oh...'. By the time you get to...what we landed...D10, 16th, D10, you're nobody! But what, it's not known you see, unless people go into the...intricacies of what happened from D-Day onwards, we were the green troops who were gonna get slaughtered...and were slaughtered. D-Day casualties, by comparison with what we was gonna get, were nothing.[307]

It is evident that, as so often in this review of popular memory, the veterans' assessment of the invasion reveals continuities between past and present attitudes. The temptation to claim the prestige attached to D-Day was also strongly felt during the war:

> Because we were Three Group and arrived on D-Day and Four Group arrived a month later, we looked down on them. It's not fair, is it? We shouldn't have done, in the Army you go where you're ordered, you go where you're sent, it's not down to you. But anyway, it's in the nature of man to feel like this but you mustn't let it get hold of you and turn you up the wrong way.[308]

Historical Consciousness and Composure

Such continuities between past and present highlight another important aspect of popular memory: the ways in which the interviewees place their experiences in a broader historical context. Kathleen Ryan rightly states that 'oral history offers a way for ordinary individuals to evaluate their lives in relation to the historical

[307] Spittles, 1, 139-140.
[308] Hunt, 2, 03.

metanarrative'.[309] Second World War veterans are naturally curious to compare their war with other conflicts before or since. Doug Mayman's account is of particular interest here, as he makes numerous references to the stilted popular view of the First World War in order to emphasise that however bad his experiences were—and he does seem to present some signs of trauma—they could have been worse. This is a tendency which Gary Sheffield has argued was common: 'for many British soldiers of the Second World War folk memories of the Somme, Gallipoli and Passchendaele acted as a benchmark of the appalling nature of war, and as a result they sometimes failed to recognise just how terrible "their" war was'.[310] In Mayman's case, though, this may have come about at a later stage:

> ML: You were talking about a drive from Amiens to Arras, and you're going through obviously some very well-known First World War battlefields round the battle of the Somme and...what did that make you think about, when you were thinking about things that were happening twenty-five years before?
>
> DM: I don't think any of us thought of the First World War. We just got on with today's war. And some of us looked at the old First World War gravestones and thought, well, so what, you know, that was a different war. But it didn't really have much effect, no, I don't think it did.[311]

In 2013, however, Mayman was eager to discuss the First World War without any specific prompting:

> ML: So what would you be doing in that period in France, to start with, when you're not actually in action.

[309] Kathleen M. Ryan, '"I Didn't Do Anything Important": A Pragmatist Analysis of the Oral History Interview', *Oral History Review*, 36/1 (2009), pp. 26, 36-7.
[310] Sheffield, 'The Shadow of the Somme', in Addison and Calder (eds.), *Time to Kill*, p. 29. Martin Francis has also drawn attention to the way the First World War loomed large in the subjectivities of those experiencing the Second: Martin Francis, 'Attending to Ghosts: Some Reflections on the Disavowals of British Great War Historiography', *Twentieth Century British History*, 25/3 (2014), pp. 360-367.
[311] Mayman, 1, 18-19.

> DM: Well...when you were not actually in action, it was...a damn sight better than the First World War. Psychologists had got hold of warfare and knew how bad it was, and so we used to have...fight for maybe two, three weeks and then be pulled out and replaced by another tank regiment. Now that was good. In the First World War they were in trenches for months, whereas we did get, not a-, not a leave or anything, but pulled out, maybe after two or three weeks, replaced by another regiment, and you get three days' rest. Now that three days' rest, that's just what you did, you just thanked God you were alive, sat down behind the lines and...then waited for the next three days and went in and replace the other regiment. So the...army people had that sense that there were-, they did know about giving people rests. They did know, not if someone was shell-shocked, not to treat them as cowards and things and so on. There was a better approach to the mental stress of fighting, yeah.[312]

In the First World War battalions were in fact regularly rotated in and out of the front line;[313] meanwhile, in the extract above and elsewhere Mayman is forced to acknowledge that leave was a rare privilege even in the Second World War.[314] In this way Mayman's use of received wisdom about the First World War to achieve composure is at times belied by the evidence of his own experience. Where he speaks of a trench full of frightened infantrymen being exhorted to go 'over the top' by a screaming sergeant-major, it is necessary to specify that '[it] sounds a bit like World War One, but it wasn't quite'.[315] His recollections of one particularly bad day of fighting on the German border are nonetheless moderated by comparison with the First World War:

> So that was my little, nasty bit of the war, so...you have that, but what was good was, they didn't put you right back again in the following day. In the First World War, you would have been in the next day. They gave

[312] Mayman, 1, 14-15.
[313] Sheffield, 'The Shadow of the Somme', p. 37.
[314] Mayman, 2, 12-14.
[315] Mayman, 1, 10-11.

> you four or five days' rest to get over it, which was very considerable, you know, it was thoughtful.[316]

Even the ability to turn down an officer's offer of a promotion is seen as an indication of better inter-rank relations in 1944-5, evidence that 'it was a different situation, it wasn't a bullying thing like the First World War'.[317] Although Mayman's interview is a particularly clear example, several of the interviewees make reference to the First World War as encapsulating outdated tactics, high casualties and uncaring leadership.[318] Using this popular image as a reference point for narrative effect is not quite the same thing, however, as consoling oneself with the thought that conditions were worse in the Great War, as Sheffield illustrates; one involves past experience, the other narration in the present, a distinction that will be returned to.

Comparisons with modern wars are also to be expected, as the interviews took place during the closing stages of British Army involvement in Afghanistan and while British intervention in Libya was in the news. Victor Gregg relates his war to the history of his regiment, which he sees as exerting an innovative stimulus on the rest of the Army from the time of its creation to the present day.[319] Early in his interview Michael Watts compares his time in an armoured car in Palestine shortly before the war with the situation in Afghanistan:

> ML: What sort of vehicles were you in at this time?
>
> MW: Rolls Royce armoured cars. And we were armoured underneath. They don't do that over in Afghanistan, do they? I can't believe it! I

[316] Mayman, 1, 19-24.
[317] Mayman, 1, 25-26.
[318] Tipping, 1, 56-60; Dutton, 1, 06-07; Hunt, 1, 120.
[319] Gregg, 2, 16-17.

> mean, we ran over bombs and that. It wrecked the cars but it didn't kill anyone.[320]

Since Watts seems to have enjoyed his pre-war army service, he uses Afghanistan to present the dangerous periods in a more positive light. However, it is more usual to use modern wars to demonstrate the severity of the fighting in 1944-5, as in the account of Syd West:

> ML: And how do, or how did, casualties affect you? People that were in your own company, your own platoon?
>
> SW: Well, to be fair, not like today where they've been together for years, train together, live together, and as I say my old regiment, the last time they were in Afghanistan they had four casualties in six months. We was lucky if we didn't have four in four minutes.[321]

Popular notions around history-writing also shape the testimony. Many of the interviewees, being themselves interested students of the history of the war, air opinions on the work of historians. They often discuss how they have continued to learn about the war in later life, and it is in this vein that John Majendie remarks that:

> I've learned so much about the war afterwards, what went on and, though reading things and finding out, and I think some of the military historians, one or two I've met, they do an incredible job, they put...marry one side and the other side, get all the details right in what had happened, and...you hear the German view, and...go on learning.[322]

However, this positive comment stands in contrast to complaints by Majendie earlier in the interview about historians, 'wise after the event', criticising British commanders.[323] Several of the interviewees had shared their memories on previous occasions, and while they are grateful for the opportunity to contribute their oral

[320] Watts, 1, 01.
[321] West, 1, 07-08.
[322] Majendie, 1, 83-84.
[323] Majendie, 1, 44-45.

histories,[324] there is evidently a degree of tension between the important interpretative role which historians are recognised to play, and the desire for the veterans to have their stories told in the way they think is accurate. Bill Partridge makes clear his indignation that Antony Beevor disagreed with his interpretation of an incident during the fighting on Mont Pincon, where a tank stumbled into the Somersets' position. Partridge argues that it was a German tank, Beevor that it was probably a British one from 13th/18th Hussars:[325]

> ...that guy in his book says that I don't know…Sergeant Partridge doesn't know a German tank from a British tank. […] I did write to him and say 'You're wrong', but...there you go. Me, who provided so much accurate information, and there he says that I provided misleading [in]accurate information, so...it upsets me.[326]

Beevor does not, in fact, question Partridge's judgement in such a direct way, as he presents the issue as an entirely understandable mistake to make in a confusing situation, but Partridge's sense of grievance is clear regardless. An impression that, in return for telling their stories, veterans are owed credence and a positive portrayal of their actions, is also evident in Stan Procter's account:

> ML: Is there anything else you want to add, Stan?
>
> SP: Well I...only in one respect. The fact is, I appear in most of these books. Extraordinary thing! And what I didn't like was what Max Hastings wrote about me, because he picked up my book and he picked out that nast-, one of the nasty bits where [lowers voice] I looted a radio set from a German lady's house, and I thought-, well, it wasn't me- just me, it was we, and I, you know, it's a thing I've been ashamed of ever since, but he had the blooming cheek to write about it in his book [laughs].[327]

[324] Ekins, 1, 18-19; Dutton, 1, 92-96.
[325] Beevor, *D-Day*, p. 396.
[326] Partridge, 1, 46-47.
[327] Procter, 6-7.

The evident awareness of veterans that they are not merely telling stories but informing historical research means that attitudes to history can be another important influence on composure. Here the principle of intersubjectivity is important—the idea that the circumstances of the interview conversation and the relationship between interviewer and interviewee have an influence on the way oral testimony is articulated.[328] There are indications that the interviewees recognised that they were being interviewed by a university representative in a relatively formal setting—that it was 'an "official", rather than casual, conversation'—[329]and afforded the occasion a certain amount of respect. Colin Criddle and Mike Hutchinson appear to be reading from notes at the start of their interviews, although they soon slip into a more relaxed conversational style, and it would not be surprising if most of the interviewees had undertaken similar preparations. Some allowed their wives to act as fact-checkers, although this had little discernible impact on the testimony.[330] Moreover, most evidently came to the interviews with pre-conceived notions of what makes 'good' or 'bad' history, and an anxiety not to waste the opportunity to record their testimony. Often this is merely indicated by a reluctance to be boring, as in Barry Freeman's description of his training:

> From there we travelled south to various places, which I- Aldershot was one we called in at, and we did some very heavy training on the South Downs and Salisbury Plain with the tanks...And then I think we moved again somewhere, but it was not really...good history, I don't think.[331]

[328] Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, pp. 54, 58.
[329] Ryan, '"I didn't Do Anything Important"', p. 35. See also Alistair Thomson, 'Memory as a Battlefield: Personal and Political Investments in the National Military Past', *Oral History Review*, 22/2 (Winter, 1995), pp. 68-9.
[330] Dauncey, 2, 20; West, 1, 11-12; see also Sokoloff, 'Soldiers or civilians?', pp. 59-66.
[331] Freeman, 1, 1-2.

Similarly, Edwin Hunt states repeatedly that he is resisting the urge to go into more detail in what is already an extremely detailed account, lest he be too long-winded,[332] and immediately after telling one anecdote, Stan Procter is anxious to check 'Am I doing the right thing?'.[333] Eric Tipping asks for permission before using a swear word, while Robert Purver mouths one rather than say it out loud.[334] Bill Partridge for one is quite conscious of the interview dynamics, saying at one point 'I'm gonna pause for breath and you can ask me questions or tell me what you think.'[335] In theoretical terms, the interviewees were aware that they were engaged in a performance which demanded a particular manner of speaking.

If most of the time these gestures to formality appear only minimally to alter the meaning of the testimony, in some instances the impact is evidently more extensive. Ken Tout, a highly educated writer of several books on the war, evidently formulated his account according to his notion of good history-writing. His focus is thematic, rather than chronological, and he relates his experiences to the key historical issues as he sees them. Although Tout's historical knowledge in some ways improves the usefulness of his testimony, it should also cause it to be approached with some caution. These are the much-contemplated words of an experienced historian, not the youth who went to war in 1944, and it is clear that Tout discusses issues which he judges to be historically relevant, not necessarily those most important to him personally. Due to the thematic structure, potentially there is a loss of information where personal incidents do not pertain to certain themes, whereas they might have

[332] Hunt, *passim*.
[333] Procter, 1, 11.
[334] Tipping, 1, 131-132; Purver, 2, 38-40.
[335] Partridge, 1, 58.

been included in a chronological account. Tout's understanding of the historiography, not his personal experience, dictates the parameters of the discussion.

A review of some of Tout's writing provides evidence of this. He explicitly states that 'Military histories must in the main concentrate on the generals. Books like this one may find room to mention lower-rank officers and the occasional exceptional 'other rank', but the vast majority never achieve a mention.'[336] Tout has a clear, if antiquated, notion of what constitutes proper military history, and it is an ideal which allows little space for the individual. It is therefore interesting to note the lengths Tout goes to expunge his personal viewpoint from his writing. During Operation TOTALIZE Tout was a tank gunner in C Squadron, 1st Northamptonshire Yeomanry. As he makes clear in the acknowledgements of his book on TOTALIZE, Tout made use of the later recollections of his tank's driver, Stan Hicken, and co-driver, Rex Jackson, when writing the book.[337] This allows Tout to report certain incidents as being drawn from the recollections of Hicken and/or Jackson, even though he himself must have seen essentially the same thing. For instance:

> Rex [Jackson] and Stan Hicken were not too happy themselves. For some time they had been watching a ginger-haired man in a trench in front of their tank, where no Highlander should be. When the man failed to move they began to realize that it was not a man in a trench. It was a disembodied head standing on the ground on its own. For the rest of the day, amid all the turbulence of shot and shell, the head sat in the grass and stared at them.[338]

In the interview Tout talks several times about the lulls in the TOTALIZE battle but makes no mention of this particular grisly sight, even though, being in the same tank,

[336] Ken Tout, *A Fine Night for Tanks: The Road to Falaise* (Stroud, 1998), p. 18.
[337] Ibid., p. 177.
[338] Ibid., p. 93.

he must surely have been aware. Later on the same day, Tout reports, 'Stan Hicken now noticed movement along the gully and alerted his commander, who ordered the gunner to traverse, in time to shoot and brew up yet another hunted hunter.'[339] Again, Tout neglects to mention this incident in the interview, even though he himself was the gunner who fired the fatal shot! Incidents such as these, which might be expected to provide ideal anecdotes for an oral history interview, are not narrated in the interview by Tout, and are only, it seems, mentioned in the book where they can be presented as the experience of somebody else.

As an aside, on the one occasion where an anecdote appears in the book as well as in the interview, it is presented in a subtly different way. From the interview:

> …on one occasion I remember jumping because the tank was on fire, and...on that occasion we grabbed our...fire extinguishers, feeling very brave because once you'd seen a tank explode you knew not to stay very near, but we felt we were very brave and put the fire out, and then we realised that what had happened was that we'd been hit by a mortar bomb on the front of the tank, which had sent...our camouflage on fire, and so the big bush that we'd transformed ourselves into with camouflage had gone on fire, and the tank itself was unhurt, so on that occasion we...survived…[340]

Here Tout injects a sense of jeopardy, but in the book, this incident is represented in a more matter-of-fact way, re-arranged to remove much of the tension and any suggestion of the crew bravely fighting a potentially lethal blaze: 'On the lip of the gully, 3 Baker were hit and seemed to be on fire, but to the relief of the crew it was only the camouflage of dry branches which burned; a fire extinguisher was adequate to that task'.[341] Tout again expunges himself from the narrative. Although this example

[339] Ibid., p. 95.
[340] Tout, 2, 11-12.
[341] Tout, *A Fine Night for Tanks*, p. 98.

demonstrates the usual ways oral and written accounts can differ in style and emphasis, for Tout the circumstance of a formal oral history interview generally appears to strengthen his existing ideas of what makes good history and thereby causes his account to take the form of a thematic discussion rather than a simple description of personal experience.

The testimony is therefore shaped in various ways by what the interviewees regard as 'good' history, and what performance they believe is expected of them. On the other hand, however, they are often very forthright and honest concerning issues which would usually be considered too crass for polite conversation. There is a sense that, while acknowledging the formality of the interview situation, more prosaic aspects of army life are part of the story and ought not to be left out. Furthermore, the passage of almost seventy years permits a frankness which may have been supressed earlier in life. Thus Bill Edwardes is willing to discuss his attempts to find a brothel in Bayeux;[342] Denis Laws openly and enthusiastically describes the easy availability of prostitutes in occupied Germany, apparently encouraged by another ex-serviceman who is present;[343] Jack Eglington and Stan Procter admit to engaging in looting;[344] and Luis Dimarco talks a great deal about drunken escapades and wartime girlfriends, as well as being stung 'on me dick' by a jellyfish while swimming in the Mediterranean.[345] These sorts of recreational pursuit do not figure in the popular image of the reticent, virtuous and essentially wholesome British soldier, but are evident throughout the testimony nonetheless. From the point of view of

[342] Edwardes, 1, 31-33.
[343] Laws, 2, 11-13. See also Criddle, 1, 86.
[344] Eglington, 1, 17; Procter, 2, 07.
[345] Dimarco, 1, 20-21.

intersubjectivity, the role of a male interviewer is vital here; it is very difficult to imagine former soldiers, who have been noted as being very sensitive to gender dynamics in interviews,[346] relating such experiences so directly to a female interviewer. When addressing another male some subjects can be presented as normal 'manly' conversation, whereas with a female listener there might, perhaps, be a well-intentioned if condescending caution about over-sharing and causing discomfort or offence, along with a degree of scepticism about the listener's ability to understand.

Popular Culture and Composure

Notably absent from many of the interviews are overt references to cultural representations of the war. This is surprising as these references have been remarked upon in a great deal of influential research. Alistair Thomson's work with Anzac veterans found some who told anecdotes from the official histories, or from the film *Gallipoli*, as if they were their own; Penny Summerfield has discussed how the television comedy series *Dad's Army* directly influenced the remembering of former Home Guard members.[347] The use of images associated with the Home Guard and D-Day has already been discussed. Colin Criddle refers to soldiers of the US 101st Airborne Division as the 'Band of Brothers', reflecting the title of Stephen E. Ambrose's book and the television series of the same name.[348] Likewise, Robert Purver's description of the beginning of Operation MARKET GARDEN, with its mass briefing

[346] Sokoloff, 'Soldiers or Civilians?', p. 61.
[347] Thomson, *Anzac Memories*, pp. 7-8; Summerfield, 'Culture and Composure', p. 71, 87; see also Summerfield and Peniston-Bird, *Contesting Home Defence*.
[348] Criddle, 1, 40; Stephen E. Ambrose, Band of Brothers (London, 1992).

followed by the armoured dash up the road, appears reminiscent of similar scenes in the film *A Bridge Too Far*:

> ...And the chief officers, the main officers, high-ranking officers, all seemed to be assembling in this sort of square where there was like...a community hall or something, and the place was absolutely swarming with generals, staff officers, and all high-ranking officers, and then our own officers came back to us and we was taken the next day to a field where they'd painted a huge canvas and some general, and I don't know his name, little fella, wore britches...jodhpurs rather [laughs], he was explaining to us that this operation was called 'Market Garden', and 'You must succeed at this, you must succeed, we've called on you 'cos you're experienced troops', da de da de da...'And you must succeed, and we're gonna start from Eindhoven, and you're going to go straight up the road over several bridges', which the Americans were being dropped on so that they would hold them open, 'but you must keep going because the airborne troops are being dropped at Arnhem', which I'll explain later, 'dropped at Arnhem, and you must meet up with 'em, and in this way we can end this war in months', that was...that was his command.
>
> So there we go, we set off from Eindhoven, and our general, Sir Brian Horrocks, was standing on the roof of a factory, I think it was called...Siemens electrical factory, electrical factory of some sort, I forget the name of it now,[349] and...we were sitting on tanks, in ducks [DUKWs], lorries, and this convoy, the tanks leading, we were sitting on the tanks, we just dashed straight up this road, straight through the enemy lines, and sure enough the Americans had taken the bridges, I can't name the bridges, and we just kept going.[350]

However, popular representations are drawn upon only rarely, and do not seem to exert the hegemonic influence over personal memory which much of the literature would suggest. Moreover, there is evidence that the interviewees utilise popular images in a more complex manner than is usually allowed for, whereby they are used as a mental shorthand to assist the listener's comprehension, without necessarily validating the accuracy of such images. The 88mm gun was feared during the war

[349] Purver appears to refer to the Philips factory in Eindhoven.
[350] Purver, 1, 14-16.

and has since become an iconic symbol of German technical prowess.[351] However, this representation is used in a more complex way in Reg Spittles' description of his regiment's first action, during Operation EPSOM,

> Now I was watching number three troop steaming off up this cornfield to this slope, where there was bushes and things, thinking...how stupid they were at the speed they were going up. They were going up there about thirty mile, thirty-five mile an hour, the sort of thing you do on an exercise when you know there's no danger. You know that somebody will perhaps come up and say 'I'm sorry but you've been knocked out'. That's...different to being told you've [been] knocked out, casually, and getting a...dirty great big eighty-eight shell through the tank. And he don't tell you you're being knocked out. He just destroys you. And they were going up there at thirty or thirty-five mile and hour, at a speed that no commander could possibly be able to look round and survey where he was going, what was happening round him, and control his vehicle. But anyway, they went up, I naturally looked away at other things happening, and when I looked back, they'd reached the crest of the field, and two of the Cromwells were burning, they were brewed up, burning like haystacks. Black smoke pouring out. Now you can imagine the initial shock, I mean I hadn't expected to see tanks destroyed as soon as that. I mean all we'd gotta do was drive down to the river! And now, there was a troop with two of its tanks destroyed, and obviously people either killed...or wounded, or whatever...[352]

In this instance the 'eighty-eight' is invoked as the extreme contrast to the bloodless consequences of tactical mistakes in exercises; the worst-case scenario which *could* befall careless crews. Spittles does not actually state who or what knocked out the tanks, and in a similar anecdote later in the interview he states, 'whatever the gun was, I don't know'.[353] Instead of arguing that the 88mm was *literally* more common or more lethal, he uses the image of the 'eighty-eight' as a convenient representation of the opposition, which is likely to have more impact than naming one of the lesser-known German anti-tank guns. Bill Partridge references 'Panzer Divisions', and Mike

[351] John Buckley, *British Armour in the Normandy Campaign* (London, 2004), p. 123.
[352] Spittles, 3, 23-25.
[353] Spittles, 4, 0-4.

Dauncey 'stormtroopers' in the same way, as bywords for the quality of German troops.[354] The Tiger tank also receives several mentions, although the interviewees more often use it as a shorthand for German armour than stress the quality of that particular design.[355] If people sometimes draw on 'public discursive constructions' to substitute for experiences which are not directly recognised in public discourses,[356] a subtler process can be envisaged in which the same process is used to clarify and streamline an account as a concession to the listener, the speaker being fully aware that the popular image is not a completely accurate one. Put another way, popular representations can enter testimony as a willing and conscious narrative tactic by the speaker, not only through the imposition of hegemonic popular discourses.

Popular culture is also referenced in order to directly dispute its representation of the past:

> TH: And I was carrying the gun, there was a-, I said 'There's a German!', and he were running through the woods. Well, I can't...you see the films, I don't care how it is, I'll see somebody with a gun, they'll go *drrrrrr*, and they'll all drop down. You try running with a Lee-Enfield, loading a rifle, five bullets, put them in there, get it up, and try and shoot somebody, and then standing still. Or you're just down there and at 'im. You're carrying it, you're doing it, but...you can't! I don't care who it is, unless you're sitting in there-, now these others, the guns what they got now, they can put it on automatic or...single shot, so if they've got it on automatic and they're going across these fields and they see-, *brrrt*, they can do that. You can't do that that when you've got a...
>
> ML: So what weapon did you use more, the Bren or the Lee-Enfield?
>
> TH: Oh, I had a rifle, yeah, you had to remember the number of your rife and everything. And...a pick or a shovel, that were the main things, that was the best thing, tucked down in your pack at the back. And you got...gas cape rolled on top...And your pouches and your bayonet and

[354] Partridge, 1, 21; Dauncey, 1, 32.
[355] Purver, 2, 01; Spittles, 5, 54-56; Partridge, 1, 58-61.
[356] Summerfield, 'Culture and Composure', pp. 89-90.

> all that rough...stuff round your neck...And then you had your helmet, and the gas mask on the front. And then you try and...run, lay down and fire, you've got the thing pushing up there, the pack on your back...It's alright if you're dug in, and they're coming, but if you're attacking it's a different thing.[357]

For Ted Howson popular representations of soldiering have not had the effect of dictating his account, but have in fact motivated him to set the record straight. He acknowledges that in modern warfare things might have changed—'they can put it on automatic[…]they can do that [now]'—but even so has no qualms recognising that his experiences do not accord with popular representations. It cannot reasonably be claimed that there is a 'discourse of the impracticability of firing a rifle on the move' upon which Howson is able to draw: his view is determined simply by what he remembers, and no discomposure, aside from perhaps a level of annoyance, is evident in his decision to dispute what he has seen in films. This point may seem like an obvious one, but it is worth stating as a corrective to views in oral history which all too often tend to see popular discourses as the ultimate arbiter of all memory and all oral testimony.

Where popular imagery is invoked, this is not necessarily because it has the effect of dictating personal memory. If this does sometimes happen, the alternative, that interviewees *choose* to draw on certain representations, must be kept in mind. They may do this because the representation provides a useful reference point shared with the speaker's audience, even though he knows it is a flawed or inaccurate one. Alternatively, it may be that the representation is a genuinely useful one which supports rather than overwrites the individual's own memories; one must be wary of

[357] Howson, 1, 47-49.

identifying apparent subjective distortions when a simpler explanation would be that the interviewee is giving an honest appreciation of how he remembers it actually being.[358] The key point here is the process of composure is a complex negotiation in which the individual's own point of view is worth at least as much as popular memory. There is little evidence here that popular memory has a hegemonic influence, that veterans simply parrot things they have seen in films or read in books which have replaced their own recollections. As Jay Winter has pointed out, 'the fact that we share and acknowledge common mediators [of popular memory]'—like films—'does not prove that we share common memories'.[359]

It is evident that the role of the individual in their own remembering is a crucial one; popular memory, as influential as it is, is never hegemonic, and rarely dictates remembering or overwrites personal memory. In many of the interviews analysed, therefore, the influence of popular memory appears limited. Composing a narrative of one's experiences is at bottom a negotiation between external social and cultural influences and internal ones bound up with the individual's unique experiences, outlook and character. Given the depth of popular consensus on the Second World War, it is these internal influences which must be seen as the major factor in the great range of interpretations which can be seen in the interviewees' testimony, as the next chapter will demonstrate.

[358] Roos, '"Reality or Nothing"', in Rogers and Leydesdorff (eds.), *Trauma*, p. 213.
[359] Winter, *Remembering War*, p. 185.

Chapter 4
Personal Memory and Composure

If popular memory delineates the boundaries of the interview discussions as being about the war, provides convenient reference points shared with the audience, and invests in the interviewees the authority as veterans to speak and be heard, it does little appreciably to influence the interviewees' specific stories: the individual's character, outlook and personal experiences are far more important in this regard. Despite living through the same war, with a stable, distinct and widely-understood collection of popular discourses to draw upon, the interviewees do not produce thirty-three similar accounts. Instead, they present a variety of interpretations of their war experiences. Popular memory provides an overarching framework which is flexible enough to accommodate a wide variety of views, but only rarely did the interviewees appear to incorporate popular motifs directly into their testimony in the way various scholars have extensively remarked upon. Each individual approached the war from their individual perspective, and their accounts demonstrate great variation even when discussing the same issues. It is not possible to divide these myriad narrative strategies into neat categories, but some general similarities can be observed.

Narratives of Disillusionment

As noted in the previous chapter, it is clear that composure need not be completely successful for an account to be produced; discomposure is rarely total and more likely to encourage seeking composure through alternative discourses rather than repression and silence. Indeed, some even turn apparent discomposure into the basis

of their accounts, emphasising their experience as one of anger and disillusionment. The notion of military service as an experience inherently unknowable to outsiders is widely recognised, and some adopt this discourse as the main prop in their search for composure. These individuals can be equated with those Jay Winter has termed 'moral witnesses', those who 'retain a sense of anger, of outrage, of frustration to the lies, distortions, reworkings, or sanitisations of their painful past', actively and intentionally contradicting perceptions of war service as admirable or meaningful, and purporting to instead reveal the forgotten or suppressed 'truth'.[360]

Michael Watts, for instance, a pre-war regular who served in an armoured car crew in Egypt and Palestine, begins his account positively:

> ML: So, what would you be doing, as a bandsman, on a day-to-day basis?
>
> MW: You'd be playing music in the mornings, afternoon it was sport or in bed, because it was Egypt you see, and in the evening we used to have an hour's music...and that was it. And I mean the band, they were all fairly good sportsmen, and I played tennis always...enjoyed it, I enjoyed it, I never-, never thought we're ever gonna be in a war.[361]

This image of contentment is quickly broken down. Watts' enjoyable life in the pre-war army was rudely interrupted by a war he hadn't signed up for,[362] and unlike wartime conscripts he was not consoled by the knowledge that military service was an unavoidable obligation. After extensive combat in the Western Desert, Watts was sent back to England and transferred to the Inns of Court Regiment. At this point, eager to avoid being sent into action as part of a unit he regarded as amateurish, he

[360] Winter, *Remembering War*, p. 263.
[361] Watts, 1, 01-02.
[362] Watts, 1, 28-29.

applied to train as a glider pilot.[363] He landed gliders in Normandy and at Arnhem, where he was taken prisoner. His attempt to avoid further combat therefore not only failed, but resulted in the even worse fate of seven months in the dire conditions of a prisoner of war camp:

> MW: I think we had four days on the train, all we had was a bucket in the corner...And as sergeant, we used to get a bit of-, we used to get-, we used to call it 'skinny'. Came up in barrels, you know, the soup...we used to get that a twelve o'clock, a tin of that, 'cos we all had tins on strings, didn't have any knives or forks or plates or anything like that. And then you had a piece of bread and a bit of butter, five o'clock, and then you got nothing then till twelve o'clock the next day. So I got a bit thin, I was seventeen stone, now I was seven when I came back [laughs].
>
> ML: And what did you do as a prisoner of war?
>
> MW: Nothing. We were all senior, we were sergeants and above, so we didn't work...we just sat and talked about food [laughs].
>
> ML: And did you get information and parcels from home?
>
> MW: We got one parcel between sixteen in seven months. That's all we saw of parcels.[364]

Resentment and disillusionment seep out of Watts' account at every stage. At Arnhem he piloted the glider containing 'Brigadier [Philip] Hicks and all his cronies'.[365] In the camp, he heavily implies he was jealous of the private soldiers, who were forced to work, since they were presumably given better rations.[366] On his return to England, he drew unfavourable comparisons with German prisoners:

[363] Watts, 1, 07.
[364] Watts, 1, 17-18.
[365] Watts, 1, 13.
[366] Watts, 1, 46.

> ML: Is there anything you would want me to pass on to the students about anything during your time in the service, or your time on- at D-Day or at Arnhem.
>
> MW: Not really. I can-, my wife said to me 'What did you do for clothing when you were a POW?', I said 'Well I had it on, same clothing, for seven months.' We never had a change of clothing...Came back to this country and there's the prisoners of war, all fit and healthy...[7]Can't believe it.[367]

Watts' experience was also contradicted by accounts closer to home:

> ML: What stopped you talking about it before?
>
> MW: I don't know, we never-, never spoke about it. My brother knew nothing about it. He went to Canada and trained Canadians, he...he had a good war. I think you wanted to forget it, completely.
>
> ML: And how do you feel now, looking back?
>
> MW: Oh, I'm very interested now, [I'm] watching some tapes...[368]

It was not until the 1990s, and his involvement in veterans' organisations, that Watts felt able to talk about his war,[369] and even though he came to do so willingly, his account is still at bottom a story of disillusionment which stands in contrast with both the 'good war' experienced by non-combatants, and the positive stories of comradeship and stoic endurance told by many who saw front-line service. He draws upon various discourses, particularly the notion prevalent after the Vietnam War that military service was inherently and immutably exploitative and damaging to those who went through it.

Winter is careful to point out that the claims of moral witnesses to provide an objective truth cannot hold water: 'their stories are as much social constructions as are those

[367] Watts, 1, 44-45.
[368] Watts, 1, 21-22. Doug Mayman makes a very similar point: 2, 19-31.
[369] Watts, 1, 24-25.

they reject or rebuke';[370] however, he nonetheless supports the notion that 'moral witnesses have a story to tell, but it is frequently one which is constructed as against the grain of conventional wisdom' as not just a way of negotiating difficult memories, but in fact a morally justified reaction against sanitised narratives of the past.[371] Yet the point bears emphasising that these men do indeed draw upon popular discourses to turn their discomposure into composure. This is because the notion that war service is disorientating, damaging and essentially unknowable is, in fact, well-established and widely recognised. If the personal experiences of these men are in themselves difficult to compose, a popular discourse exists which validates such accounts completely. Far from courageously going against the grain of public opinion, as Winter suggests, these men merely draw upon a different facet of it.

Another interviewee who draws upon aspects of moral witnessing is Joe Ekins, a former tank gunner and loader/operator in the 1st Northamptonshire Yeomanry who frames his account largely in terms of poor training and leadership. Much of this vitriol is directed at superiors: in his opinion officers and generals did not know how to train or command their men because they themselves were poorly prepared. Ekins also recounts a distaste for army life, discipline and 'bullshit' which he did not believe to be constructive. He places emphasis on the dire conditions in Normandy and the poor level of information afforded to the tank crews.[372] Several farcical incidents are recalled, including accidentally leaving behind a crew member during a march, becoming trapped in no-man's land in the freezing winter conditions, and, after the

[370] Winter, Remembering War, p. 270.
[371] Ibid., p. 239.
[372] Ekins, 1, 17-18; 22.

German surrender, a wasteful exercise in the Zuider Zee which resulted in the pointless loss of several Buffalo amphibious vehicles, followed by a near-fatal case of diphtheria which threatened to strike Ekins down at the moment of his final escape from the army.[373] All of these add to the idea of blundering and incompetence among the powers that be, and the sense that Ekins' army service was a waste of time. Even wholly innocuous events are tinged with negativity, so that, for example, his regiment's uneventful landing in Normandy provides an opportunity to mention the high rate of sinkings among American DD tanks.[374] Moreover, he supports this view with several additional examples of command incompetence which he evidently could only have learned of after the war. His overall view is summed up in one statement: '...you know, oh God we were terrible. The Germans must have been awful because we beat 'em, and how we beat 'em I never know.'[375] Like Michael Watts, it took until the 1990s until Ekins felt able to discuss the war, and then only so that he could reveal 'the truth':

> Ken Tout was in our regiment, you see, and he decided he were gonna write a book, and...he got in touch with me and said, 'look, I'm gonna write a book' and I said 'well are you gonna tell the truth' and he said 'yes' I said 'right well alri-...you know I'll tell you the-, my bit then', so that's how it started, and of course once his book got out then...everybody wanted to get in on it, and...[5] I thought well alright if the story gets out and I always make the point how bad war is and what not, that it's worth...and if you talk to kids and what not it's worth doing, so I did, and of course since then it's, it's it's...gone apace, people give me-, I mean all these pictures...what people have given me, that one there at the back there, Totalize, and...[5] and of course all these, have you seen these? All these come out and there's the Canadian one and...they all come...again I try to end them, the bit that I put in I try

[373] Ekins, 1, 53-54, 58-59, 63-65, 67-68.
[374] Ekins, 1, 15.
[375] Ekins, 1, 52.

> to...make a, you know...tell 'em what...I thought it were worth doing, to do that, and that's really when I started to...to talk about it...[376]

Ekins' account, by questioning positive interpretations and proffering a less palatable 'truth', therefore appears to conform to the style of moral witnessing.

There are other influences on Ekins' achievement of composure, however, which demonstrate again the way that composure is an individual process predicated on individual circumstances. On 8th August 1944, during Operation TOTALIZE, Ekins, as the gunner in a Sherman Firefly, was responsible for the significant feat of knocking out three Tiger tanks. SS-Hauptsturmführer Michael Wittmann, recognised as one of the top-scoring German 'panzer aces' of the Second World War, was killed in his Tiger in the same engagement, and Ekins was for many years credited with having fired the fatal shot (more recently, Brian A. Reid has demonstrated that Wittmann's Tiger was almost certainly knocked out by a Canadian Sherman of the Sherbrooke Fusiliers).[377] Ekins himself, however, never claimed to have killed Wittmann, and was conflicted about the attention focussed on one day's battle by people who seemed more intent on furthering Wittmann's cult status or claiming the prestige of killing the famous ace than exploring the real experiences of the combatants:

> …'course when they found out about Wittmann, all the lies started to come out, all the stories you know, like we...the Canadians claimed him, the Swiss [sic] claimed him, I mean I never claimed him, ever! All I claimed that I knocked out three Tigers...with one Firefly, which I thought were good enough you know without any of the...but all these stories started to get about and what not and...people kept coming to me and asking me about them…[378]

[376] Ekins, 1, 78-80.
[377] Brian A. Reid, No Holding Back: Operation Totalize, Normandy, August 1944 (Toronto, 2005), pp. 410-430.
[378] Ekins, 1, 78.

It was this in particular which motivated Ekins to break his silence on the war and contribute to Tout's book. He therefore had very personal reasons for adopting the corrective stance of a moral witness, and distancing himself from the anodyne, romanticised view of combat implicit in popular depictions of the events of 8th August 1944.

It was also as a reaction to the Wittmann incident that Ekins chose, unlike the majority of other interviewees, to talk at length on his post-war life. Some interviewees move beyond the narrative frame of the war in order to bring war experiences into line with broader narratives about personal success. However, for Ekins, this is done to create *contrast* with the war, and to emphasise his disinterest in Wittmann. He discusses his successful career as a shoemaker and later shoe designer, his happy family life, trips to Papua New Guinea, the achievement of a black belt in judo, and his relationship with a Belgian family he had met during the war.[379] Ekins therefore had no motive to look back on the war as a positive part of his life; that came later. Instead, he came to see the war as a wasteful interlude in a successful life. Furthermore, discussing his post-war life served to emphasise his reticence about the death of Wittmann—there was more to his life than simply being the man attributed with unknowingly firing the shot that killed the famous Tiger ace.

A final example of moral witnessing is seen in the testimony of Victor Gregg. Here, again, the decision to make use of this narrative form must be seen as a consequence of the individual's mindset. His testimony cannot be understood separately from his

[379] Ekins, 1, 71-94.

well-established life story, published as a memoir co-written with filmmaker Rick Stroud in 2011.[380] Indeed, the interview is effectively a tie-in for the book; Stroud is present, and the conversation becomes a thematic discussion of the book rather than the standard chronological progression through the war. The fact that Gregg's life story is so well-established possibly prevents the interview from being as fruitful as it might have been had the interviewers felt able to take a more interrogative stance. His testimony is representative of the type of war narrative that arises out of memoir writing with an overt focus on the individual, especially when encouraged by popular historians and an undiscerning audience. The story leads from his upbringing in poor but vibrant surroundings in King's Cross, through joining the Rifle Brigade, action in the Western Desert, including driving for the Long Range Desert Group and fighting in the 'Snipe' action at El Alamein, joining the Parachute Regiment and invading Italy, to parachuting into Arnhem and being captured. After sabotaging a soap factory he was condemned to death but escaped execution when he was caught up in the bombing of Dresden and escaped to meet the advancing Soviets. Gregg's colourful life continued after the war, as he joined the Communist Party and was involved in shadowy errands at the behest of both the Soviet and British security services. Later he carried packages between East and West across the Iron Curtain, and in August 1989, having become involved with the Hungarian Democratic People's Forum, was one of a party who cut the frontier wire between Hungary and Austria.

As Gregg is able to draw upon such a phenomenally eventful life, it is no surprise that the focus of his testimony is on his own larger-than-life character. If most veterans'

[380] Victor Gregg and Rick Stroud, *Rifleman: A Front-Line Life* (London, 2011).

testimony seeks to explain the war, albeit through that individual's personal perspective, his testimony seeks to explain Victor Gregg. The essential feature of his character, we are told in both the interview and the book, is a profound individualism and mistrust of authority. At times, Gregg himself prompts Lucas to question him on certain episodes which serve this persona, such as falsifying his paybook: 'Ask me how much of a crook I was!'[381] The war is held to have strengthened these characteristics, and this is where moral witnessing becomes apparent, as Gregg draws on various discourses around command incompetence, the wastefulness of war and its impact on the individual. As he writes:

> I knew nothing about the rules of ordinary society, a society not governed by the soldier's constant awareness of the need for survival. There must have been any number of similar casualties among the men who had served their time in front-line units—men whose minds had been brutalised by the killing and the terror of modern war. And it is no different for soldiers today.[382]

Gregg holds the war responsible for causing the personal flaws which continued to determine the course of his life: his inability to settle on one career, his neglect of his first marriage and his reckless acceptance of clandestine missions into the Eastern Bloc. It is witnessing the bombing of Dresden, rather than any experience directly linked to his military service, which is identified as the key cause of Gregg's disillusionment. In his view, the destruction of Dresden was worse than any of his battles: 'This was genocide, ordered by high-ranking politicians, not by the armed forces. For myself, I will never forgive them. Never.'[383] Gregg takes on the outraged stance of moral witnessing because he is able to align it with his mistrust of authority,

[381] Gregg, 2, 131-139.
[382] Gregg and Stroud, *Rifleman*, pp. 251-2; see also Gregg, 2, 35-36,
[383] Gregg and Stroud, *Rifleman*, p. 170.

a theme which runs as a constant through his entire life story. At times hindsight is evidently necessary for this theme to be upheld. MARKET GARDEN, Gregg claims, was clearly going to fail from the outset:

> ML: And what were you expecting at Arnhem?
>
> VG: Expecting? Experience told me that the British Army never wins a battle without a big cock-up first, so...on that basis, yeah, we was expecting the worst. We knew jolly well what we-, we had raised our suspicions that the-, had the-, when they called us all in the hall and told us about it. How did they expect us to-, who expects us to walk through a...an inhabited area, an urban area, some seven or eight kilometres, in a day? Probably take a week! It's street fighting!
>
> ML: And had you had specific training on street fighting?
>
> VG: No! No, of course not! Didn't have no training, all you had [was] to use your loaf. The obvious thing to do was not to go through the streets, not to go through Nijmegen on the way to Arnhem, just go round the outside of it. But nobody ever thought of that.
>
> Rick Stroud: And there weren't the roads to do that, were there? I mean, they couldn't do that.
>
> VG: They thought, well, the first lot went by the river, went through a little track which led by the river, the pathfinders and people like that, who dropped on the first day, the very first lot to drop, they made it to the bridge. Of course it was the surprise of their...and the next thing they used their loaf and kept of the main road. But...I mean Model was no idiot. He'd seen it all before.[384]

One suspects, however, that the flaws in the MARKET GARDEN plan and the talents of *Generalfeldmarschall* Model were less obvious to Gregg during the war.

One of the advantages of oral history is its potential to elicit an account which is franker and less likely to have been restructured than written autobiography. While the book provides quite a one-dimensional assessment, there are indications in the

[384] Gregg, 2, 58-60.

less structured interview that Gregg's search for composure was more complex than simply criticising authority, since he somewhat oxymoronically also displays a strong sense of pride in his former regiment, a disconnect which is evident from the very beginning of the interview:

> ML: Vic, can I ask you, when you first joined the Army, what was the training like, in this period before the war?
>
> VG: Repetitive, repetitive, repetitive...The training was...programmed to turn unruly youths and young men, with very little education, into what you would call people who would obey orders...without hesitation, in other words to turn you into some sort of automaton...[8] Later on I would describe it as a psychotic automaton...because if you say psychotic in fact you was being taught how-, efficient methods of killing people, I don't know what other phrase you would use, but you don't think of things like that, naturally. It wasn't brutal, I never came across a situation where the training was brutal...[5] but I think that was probably due to the...to the regiment that I served in...I've been present at instances in other regiments where I would certainly describe the training as brutal, but it wasn't so in the Rifle Brigade, different attitude entirely, so in that case, in that event, my introduction into army life was...not too bad at all, really.[385]

If the training was morally suspect, designed by the powers that be to turn youths into trained killers, Gregg was exempted from the worst of this programming, because his regiment was special. This example highlights one of the potential benefits of interviewing: that by placing the veteran on the spot, and limiting the opportunities for complex feelings and opinions to be actively flattened out into a 'tidier' narrative, it is likely to produce a more candid and nuanced account than a written memoir.

As is common, Gregg's sense of regimental pride is bound up with what it means to be a 'proper' veteran, and while it is usual, as a frontline soldier, to separate oneself

[385] Gregg, 1, 00-02.

from the rear-echelon troops, Gregg goes further, and places his unit a step apart from even frontline infantry regiments:

> It's the difference between-, well as I said, Matthew, if you talk to a person who's been in the same situation as I have, and there's not a lot of them about, I gotta be truthful about that, you'll get the line of answers that I'm giving you. If you talk to another bloke, who's been in, say, different circumstances, you'll get a completely different...[4] completely different line of answers. I think what the...I don't know what the common-, if you was to say, well, what's the common denominator between the two experiences, I don't know...They've been away from home...That's the only-, that's all I can think of-, that's all I can think of here, I can't think of-, because there's no relationship between a really perpetual front-line unit and the majority of army units which are brought up to tackle a battle when it starts.[386]

The insistence that his testimony is unique because his experience was almost unique is repeated several times.[387] For Gregg, it is important to emphasise that his regiment was one of the only true frontline units in the army; an assessment which is somewhat ironic considering that Gregg spent much of the Western Desert campaign driving a truck far from the front line. Moreover, Gregg identifies the Rifle Brigade, along with the King's Royal Rifle Corps, as originators of the tactical doctrine of the modern British Army:

> To learn about the life of a British soldier in the Second World War, you've really come to the wrong bloke, because the vast majority of British soldiers were in-, were under the control-...Well because I considered that the regiment that I was in, I was lucky enough to serve in, was a unique regiment, not only in what they achieved, but in their method-, in the methods which they used to keep the regiment going. It was definitely unique, and thankfully that is being transmitted now right through the Army, right through the Rifles, which they turned into. The vast majority of the British soldiers were in a different sort of situation entirely. We never had to fix bayonets and go forward, that wasn't our job...or 'fix swords' as we would have put it. So what you're

[386] Gregg, 2, 128-129.
[387] Gregg, 2, 13-14, 72-74.

> looking at now, well what you're asking questions about, is a...a small band of...of soldiers who were in a rather unique regiment, because there was no other regiment like it, as far as the way they...the way they...effected their discipline.[388]

Gregg thus places his experience in the history of a regiment which, he argues, had a central role in the development of the Army from the Napoleonic period to the present day, and was uniquely innovative. It is this assessment which allows him to reconcile pride in his regiment with his wider mistrust of the power and authority which the Army otherwise embodied. Victor Gregg's multifaceted search for composure is one of the more complex examples considered here, combining moral witnessing, regimental pride, various discourses around veterancy and soldiering, and, most important of all, his own maverick character.

Narratives of Disorientation

Other accounts parallel those of the moral witnesses, but differ since, rather than purporting to report a suppressed 'truth', they present the war as a chaotic event, equivalent to a natural catastrophe, which could only be endured, but not controlled or understood. Most veterans characterise events as beyond personal comprehension, especially when discussing combat, but certain individuals make this the main framework of their search for composure. In doing so they stress mutual assistance, including with erstwhile enemies and civilians, in the face of events which were larger than any individual. Geoff Young, for instance, presents himself as fully at the mercy of wanton and meaningless events with no ability to influence them. This may have had the potential to cause major discomposure; however, he is able to fashion a

[388] Gregg, 2, 16-17.

narrative by emphasising that, in such a terrible war, the best he could do was try to help others caught up in it. He was left out of battle during the fighting on Hill 112, for instance, so his memory of that battle is helping the wounded along with German medics.[389] The crossing of the Rhine is described in similar terms, as he encounters some unprepared German militia who are disarmed, given biscuits and sent to safety; witnesses a family needlessly destroyed when they are caught in the crossfire; and then is forced to break regulations to try to save the life of a British soldier who had been accidentally shot.[390] As the driver of a jeep, Young apparently spent more time than most dealing with the aftermath of combat; possibly it was his insulation from the very sharp end that permitted him to avoid the bitterness and hatred felt by many front-line soldiers, and regard even the enemy generously. As he met his wife in Germany Young seems to look back on his time there with some fondness, and his account concludes with a striking juxtaposition:

> ML: What overall, what motivates you, what keeps you there? You were saying obviously you don't think about running away but...why do you do what you do, what makes you stay, what makes you fight, what makes you...?
>
> GY: Well, we thought, if we'd been-, if the Germans had have won, what was going to happen to us, that's the only thing that...Whether they would have been any worse than they were, I don't know...And we must remember there was always some good Germans about, more so probably than you think, a lot were...not Nazis at all. That's the only thing I think-, that I can really remember about...I got on very well with the German children in her village, they used to support me in the football. Quite amazing, to go out in Germany to play and you had fifty or sixty youngsters following you, my company team actually. And we even took them on our coaches-, our lorries, into Celle when the big

[389] Young, 1, 12-14.
[390] Young, 1, 47-52.

> teams came over, they came in with us, we took them in there to see the matches.[391]

Young's view that most participants in the war were victims is demonstrated as he points out that most German soldiers were not Nazis, and parallels them with the innocent children. The moral, in spite of his obviously disturbing experiences, is that there were good deeds to be observed even in incredibly trying circumstances which nobody could control.

Bill Edwardes frames his account in a similar way to Young's, though he struggles to maintain the same level of positivity. He is frank about the level of strain endured as a stretcher-bearer, with minimal ability to influence events but an especially strong obligation to do whatever the situation demanded:

> …when you got back in your hole and you sat down [after dealing with a casualty], then the shakes would start, and you'd look at each other and you'd say 'We don't wanna do that again', but the call comes and you do it again, because, again, I'm sure it's training, and I'm sure it's because you know somebody else is relying on you, but you've gotta do it, and you've gotta do it as best you can.[392]

In the same way, 'Some days were not active, some days were terribly active, so you'd never know what was going to happen, unless you were actually in a rest period.'[393] In spite of the strain, Edwardes evidently took pride in his work and could describe many aspects of his job at length. Such narratives of war as natural catastrophes in which all involved are victims are common currency in popular culture and thus offer

[391] Young, 1, 83-84.
[392] Edwardes, 1, 20.
[393] Edwardes, 1, 23.

attractive frameworks for veterans who have difficulty demonstrating their personal agency but can present themselves as having focussed on helping others.

That said, this was not the case for another medic, Harry Askew, who seems to have great difficulty composing a coherent account, possibly because he had difficulty coming to terms with witnessing so much death and injury in the large base hospital at Asnelles-sur-Mer. However, one anecdote seems to sum up the feelings of naïvety, cluelessness and isolation which characterise his memories of the war:

> When we got to Arromanches, they...they said, 'Anybody know anything about horses?' Like an idiot, put me hand up. They said, 'Well, there's a horse round the back, and a cart. We want you to go to-, about two miles away'...water, for a water tank, I think it was. Anyhow I got halfway there and I could hear these tanks coming, and they started coming and it was a narrow road, and I tried to...get on the side, 'course and the wheels were fitting like that, and the bloody horse and cart went over, in the middle of the bloody road! And this Army captain or whatever he was called me...everything under the sun to get it up. I said 'I can't get it up, I've tried.' Anyhow he had to get some of his men, and they got it up again. I was on my own on that...that do.[394]

Narratives of Personal Success

Many, however, can make more sense of their own actions in the war. If moral witnesses and those who employ narratives of chaos generally argue that the war had a negative and damaging effect on their lives, others are able to incorporate the war into more positive narratives of personal development. Edwin Hunt, for instance, relates his success in the army to skills gained in civilian life as a waterman on the river Thames, opening the interview with an enthusiastic account of utilising 'shearing'

[394] Askew, 1, 12-14.

during a pontoon bridge-building exercise, a performance which earned him his first promotion.[395] The interview is mostly a description of his rise through the ranks of the Royal Engineers from sapper in a territorial field company to major advising on river-crossing operations at Second Army headquarters. After the war, he returned to London and lectured in watermanship, eventually being appointed Royal Waterman and serving as Queen's Bargemaster from 1978 to 1990. Thus, the war is an important part of Hunt's extremely successful career, and the emphasis throughout the interview on the skills involved in his work brings his wartime experiences into line with his life as a whole. Likewise, the construction of the bridge over the Maas at Gennep—the longest floating Bailey bridge of the war—acts as a focal point both of Hunt's wartime achievements and his post-war reminiscence; an achievement to be proud of at the time, as well as one he felt gratified to see still remembered when he returned to Holland.[396] His account is not free of troubling passages, but it is generally positive. Hunt draws primarily upon his personal success, rather than popular discourses, to validate his narrative of the war.

Another interviewee who bases his composure on personal success is Bill Partridge; in his case, specifically his proficiency as a soldier and an instructor. Early in the interview he explains how he was personally concerned with improving the quality of training: '...the training in the very early days, and there were no manuals, was so bad that, they just had to be better, and I had to do my bit towards it.'[397] This foreshadows his success as an NCO and sometime platoon commander in Normandy and as an

[395] Hunt, 1, 00-13.
[396] Hunt, 3, 18-26; 68-77.
[397] Partridge, 1, 03.

instructor after being wounded, which is strengthened by unflattering comparisons with various officers and planners. Partridge is unusually honest about his own modes of thinking, both during the war, when he could apparently be impatient and intolerant of mistakes, and in retrospect—'I'm so quick in criticising people when I shouldn't be'[398]—but his outspokenness is an important part of his sense of self as an expert soldier, which grants him authority to speak about the war. This identity does not require Partridge to purport that he relished the experience, and he freely admits that he found it personally preferable, as well as probably a better use of his talents, to teach recruits rather than continue to lead a platoon in action.[399]

Spatial and temporal distortions, discussed in more detail in the next chapter, can also support individual searches for composure; this is demonstrated by Partridge's description of being wounded during 43rd Division's crossing of the Seine at Vernon:

> Our leading section...they were held up by machine-gun fire on the other side of a garden wall, so...I said we'll get the PIAT, and if it'll blast a hole in a tank it'll blast a hole in a garden wall, make it very uncomfortable for the machine gunners on the other side...So I thought what's all this anyway about being shot at, I'll go and have a look for myself. So I go round the corner, and the guy shoots at me. Now in the meantime, Major Garner had come up to me, and...so I said to him, you know, 'What are you doing this far forward? It's just letting you get killed, and then what's gonna happen to D Company, they'll go all to pieces just 'cos they haven't got a company commander. You've got no business being this far forward', I says, I mean he was new and I was an old hand at that...[inaudible 4] Well I couldn't really care less whether he came out of the 4th Wilts or not. So...I'd already been shot at...no, I hadn't been shot at, so I left him, I went round the corner, and I was shot at. So I turned around, and he hadn't really gone very far, so I decided to [inaudible], you see. Every time you gone round this corner you get shot at, I was trying to drive on together and he shouldn't be so far forward. Of course the guy shot again, and he was a better shot that time. So the

[398] Partridge, 1, 69.
[399] Partridge, 4, 0-2.

> next thing I knew I was being dragged out of the line of fire by Major Garner, with my heels bumping along...along the ground...and got great difficulty in breathing. He'd smashed a couple of ribs. So...and that's...well, yeah, that's really the end of my fighting career.[400]

Evidently, Partridge pieces together his narrative of the incident as he tells it; the effect is to emphasise that it was concern for the safety of Major Garner which caused him to stop after the first burst of fire and allow himself to be hit. However, another account of the incident is provided in Sidney Jary's *18 Platoon*: 'Leading his platoon from the front, he rounded the corner into the narrow lane and was *immediately* hit by a burst of fire. Seriously wounded, he was rapidly removed by our stretcher-bearers'.[401] Although he presumably consulted other witnesses, and confirms Major Garner was in the front line at the time, Jary's version is not necessarily any more reliable, as he was not a direct eyewitness and was also dependent on memory decades after the event; however, the difference is instructive. In Jary's account, Partridge's wounding was sudden and unlucky; in Partridge's own account, he dallied and allowed himself to be hit due to an admirable desire to protect the newly-arrived major and preserve the command structure of the company—relating the incident to his own proficiency as a soldier.

Narratives of Collective Success

There is also a collective version of narratives of success and professionalism, particularly demonstrated by officers. Though most accounts touch on the matter of *esprit de corps*, officers' narratives often exhibit rosy generalisations about the

[400] Partridge, 1, 70-72.
[401] Sydney Jary, *18 Platoon* (Winchester, 1987), p. 24. Emphasis added.

indomitable stoicism or cheerfulness of the men, while neglecting to devote much attention to what the individual personally did, which reflects their actual concerns at the time: 'The recollections of old soldiers correspond very closely to the different perspectives of their age and rank at the time of the combat they are describing'.[402] For officers, attending to their men offers a consistent theme for their accounts, a reason for pride (in their personal and collective performance) and perhaps, at times, a way to avoid dwelling on their personal responses to difficult situations. In this way, Mike Hutchinson aligns his personal actions during the fighting on Hill 112 with those of his men:

> Now, I had quite a number of casualties going up, but you know I don't know what it was, I couldn't pay an awful lot [of] attention because we, I had to keep the men moving, and I had to keep on going forward. And so...but when I heard that somebody had been killed, I'm afraid I had to say, 'Oh dear, I'm sorry, but I've got to go on'. And the men were the same. One of their pals would get killed by the side of him, and he'd probably make him comfortable if he could, and then...but he had to go on. And...nobody actually...broke down, as they say. Nobody sort of gave up and said, 'Oh, I can't go on'. It was incredible spirit. The men just knew that they had a job to do. And they all, they all did it together.[403]

Hereward Wake interprets open questions as referring to his whole unit, rather than himself personally.[404] Mike Dauncey also talks with great relish about the bond he formed with his men while training in the Cheshire Regiment, and even though his main war experience was as a glider pilot at Arnhem, which was more of an individual

[402] McManners, *Scars of War*, p. 136; Hutchinson, 3, 04, 16-17, 62-63; Wake, 1, 05.
[403] Hutchinson, 3, 12, 19-21.
[404] Wake, 1, 38, 40-43.

rather than a collective experience, he doggedly refers back to his formative experiences in the Cheshires several times.[405]

Officering also shapes Sir Robert Ford's account. Famous for commanding British forces in Northern Ireland at the time of the Bloody Sunday Massacre in 1972, he may have appreciated the opportunity to talk about his Second World War experiences instead. However, he provides a very broad overview with little in the way of specific incidents or experiences. The main focus is on his entire unit's campaign experience, especially in terms of morale and logistics—aspects which, whatever his views during the war, he must have gained an appreciation of during a post-war career in which he eventually became Adjutant General. On the matter of medical treatment, for instance, Ford loudly announces his views:

> Normally there- within reach there was...a medical...attendant, that would be-, probably be a trooper, who was trained, and the casevac system was wonderful, actually, it really was. I mean, that was the one thing which the British army had learned, that to keep morale up, you must have a system [increases in volume] which everyone knows is first class. If you are wounded, you will be looked after in the best possible condition and as quickly as possible, and we all knew that, we had lectures on this before we went, part of our training of course was all this, I didn't mention any of that because there was so much training, so many aspects of life...[returns to normal volume] health and all the rest of it we had to be taught about and hear about.[406]

These points are well-explained and instructive, though Ford's personal view of the war remains something of a mystery. He devotes scant attention to his first six months in the ranks, simply stating it was 'fine, and a very interesting experience',[407] perhaps

[405] Dauncey, 1, 15.
[406] Ford, 3, 15.
[407] Ford, 1, 02.

because his work as an officer better befits his sense of self. With few exceptions, his campaign is described as a collective experience.

Another account displaying the understatement and sanitisation typical to officers' testimony comes from Sir Hugh Beach, probably encouraged by the fact that as an engineer he was relatively isolated from the front line. His, however, is essentially an individual story, and draws particularly on a self-image of youthful exuberance and insouciance towards danger which is something of a cliché among the veterans:

> HB: …at that stage one regards oneself as invulnerable...oddly.
>
> ML: So it would never cross your mind that you would end up either being killed, or wounded as you were?
>
> HB: Yeah, well I mean, if you'd asked me, 'In theory, do you think you'll end this campaign alive?', I'd only have said 'Well I hope so', you know, and theoretically one realised because I mentioned the conversation earlier where you said 'Half of us won't get back', so...theoretical, but you know you regard yourself as, 'Won't happen to me'. It's odd psychology. Probably only happens to young people, I think the older you get the more...the more you become cautious and frightened and so on.[408]

Having joined a field company with substantial experience in North Africa and Italy, 'all I can say is that I felt very small',[409] and accordingly the campaign is described through a series of anecdotes which invariably involve Beach being stripped of any heroic preconceptions—by having to share a slit trench with a dead cow, for instance[410]—or foolishly courting danger. At Mont Pinçon:

> …the infantry advanced, and when they got up to the crossroads they wanted their anti-tank guns, and my job was to lead a little party of sappers to clear the mines up to the-, up to the crossroads, and they did

[408] Beach, 1, 28.
[409] Beach, 1, 04.
[410] Beach, 1, 07-08.

> so, and the first vehicle advanced and promptly went up on a mine. So there was a bad moment. So I took my life in my hands, and simp-...I sat myself down on the mudguard of the next vehicle and said, 'Drive on', ha! So we succeeded, but-...well, we succeeded.[411]

All these anecdotes are delivered light-heartedly and accompanied by Beach's distinctive guffaw at regular intervals. In the inevitable climax of the story, though, he receives his comeuppance. At the Belgian border, Beach reports, he unwisely picked a fight with a German patrol, was shot through the spine—'which was not a good moment'—and was lucky to be dragged to safety and subsequently recover.[412] Intriguingly, in describing his rescue and evacuation, having finally fallen foul of the war's dangers and been disabused of his innocence, Beach shifts his perspective to that of an outsider looking in on events (quite unlike, say, Bill Partridge, who describes the painful process, like every other part of his active service, in all its gory detail).[413] Recounting his own naïvety seems to be important in Beach's achieving composure, helping him to rationalise his decisions and distance himself from the more disturbing aspects of his experience.

Narrating Non-Combat Roles

Several of the interviewees, although they belonged to a 'fighting arm', served in supporting roles which largely insulated them from the dangers of front-line combat. Although memories of rear-echelon experiences abounded after the war, and arguably 'swamped the recollections of those who had endured the worst of times',[414] oral history interviewing still focusses overwhelmingly on combat veterans, marginalising

[411] Beach, 1, 09-10.
[412] Beach, 1, 15-18. This incident is discussed further in Chapter Six.
[413] Partridge, 1, 72-79.
[414] Ellis, 'Reflections on the "Sharp End" of War', in Addison and Calder (eds.), *Time to Kill*, pp. 14-15.

more comfortable experiences. Robert Purver and Ted Howson both belonged to the 5th Royal Berkshire Regiment, which formed part of No. 8 Beach Group, providing logistical assistance for the Canadian landings on Juno Beach. Both men later saw a great deal of front-line service, especially after they were transferred to the 5th Wiltshires, and neither, therefore, feels a need to focus much attention on their logistical work, other than stressing its monotony or noting the more interesting parts like guarding prisoners.[415]

Others can claim no real combat experience. While these individuals appear happy that in their indispensable supporting roles they had 'done their bit', they nonetheless face the problem of aligning their experiences with popular notions of what constitutes a veteran, a status which usually assumes combat experience. In this, they demonstrate the way popular memory provides frameworks in which individual memory must fit.

Denis Laws, for instance, worked as a Royal Engineers tradesman producing metal parts at a workshop behind the lines. He was motivated to enlist, despite being exempt from conscription, because he felt that he wasn't 'doing his bit'. As Juliette Pattinson has pointed out, many reserved workers felt dissatisfied with a societal position that, although it was fully affirmed by official propaganda, denied them the masculine prestige attached to military service: 'Their desire to serve in uniform in a combatant role superseded the state's avowal of their value.' For example, twenty-eight of the fifty-six men interviewed for Pattinson's study attempted to enlist in the armed forces;

[415] Purver, 1, 09-10; Howson, 1, 02, 29-30.

only six were successful.[416] Laws was one of the relative few who managed to escape their reserved occupation, although, as noted in the previous chapter, he finds his motives somewhat illogical and difficult to explain in the light of modern attitudes to war and patriotism.[417]

Laws is reticent about emphasising the importance of his war service and suggests several times throughout the interview that he is the wrong person to be questioning. From the beginning this uncertainty is established as the key theme of Laws' account, as he establishes an ironic note when comparing his civilian and army work:

> DL: ...and I managed to get out of me apprenticeship and I volunteered. Well all I did was to go from one workshop, and I went in the Royal Engineers, and I finished up in another workshop, with a uniform on [laughs].
>
> ML: And when was this, what year did you join up, what year did you volunteer?
>
> DL: 1943, and...from then onwards I was a-...in a army workshop, and...I went over to France, but...see I never saw any fighting, not real fighting. We got bombed a bit and shelled a bit, but apart from that you know, it was...it was almost like civvy street, in uniform.[418]

Despite making the effort to contribute to the war effort in a more direct way, Laws was foiled by the army bureaucracy which assigned him a job largely indistinguishable from the one he had just left—he was still just making things for the army, and, as a non-combatant, could not fully claim the prestige of military service. In the end, the reality of his relatively comfortable position, largely free from both danger and overbearing discipline, must be acknowledged:

[416] Pattinson, 'British Civilian Masculinity', p. 717.
[417] Laws, 2, 00-01.
[418] Laws, 1, 00.

> DL: ...and I...I can't say that...In fact I suppose really and truly, I...really well enjoyed myself, the weather was nice, I had a nice lorry, workshop, you know, lathe and everything, and...nice and dry, had a generator, I mean...it was...The thing was, I mean...if you did your job, and they let you...I was virtually left alone, you know...We had NCOs and that but they were all working as well. I mean we had staff sergeants that were still working. I think the only one that didn't work were the warrant officer and the captain. He were just driving around in his car all day. He must have a had a right-...chasing the women I think, he was. I heard before the war he was a salesman in a car sales room, but mind you he was easy to get on with, so I couldn't complain.
>
> ML: So what would a normal day be, what's your day-to-day activities, what would you be doing?
>
> DL: In the war?
>
> ML: In the-, yep, in the workshop, what are you gonna be-, what were you doing?
>
> DL: Well, you just...got up...When they...gave you a shout, you got up, you had a wash and a shave and...you went and got a bit of breakfast at the...cookhouse. You used to get your bacon and fried bread [laughs], you know, they had the bacon in tins and everything, and...and then I used to go into the workshop, my workshop that I had, and...if I was unlucky somebody, a sergeant, would come along and said 'We can't get a spare for this, can you make it?', and I'd get some metal and...and see if I could make it, you know, and...that was virtually it, you know, and if no-one come along I made a cigarette lighter [laughs].[419]

The same anxiety about dishonestly claiming the status of veteran is also evident in the testimony of Frank Duckett, also of the Royal Engineers, who was engaged in battlefield clearance work. He tries, and fails, to align his experience of landing in Normandy with well-known images of the assault troops splashing ashore through the surf:

> ML: So when did you land in France?

[419] Laws, 2, 05-07.

> FD: About D plus...at the end of June...We landed on the Mulberry harbour, we didn't...there was no jumping in the sea...[420]

Duckett landed too late to have landed on 'D plus something', and by arriving at Port Winston missed out on the iconic experience of wading onto the beach. Later in the interview, he is careful to point out that his 'was quite an easy job really'.[421] At the same time, however, he does make an effort to explain that the work he was doing was worthwhile, and 'quite interesting really'.[422] Denis Laws employs the exact same phrasing concerning the bridging of the Rhine, which he was involved in, noting that 'it was quite interesting',[423] apparently with the same motive: to persuade the listener that it was not only the front-line soldiers who were involved in important work.

Aside from defending the importance of their work, a narrative strategy especially prevalent among these men is to emphasise their soldierly credentials in order to claim membership of the veterans' club. Barry Freeman, a private in the 1st Worcesters, was trained as an infantryman but assigned to drive a half-track into Normandy. On landing, however, his half-track was immediately commandeered, and Freeman was reassigned to a static job guarding a Canadian logistical unit.[424] In order to explain such chaotic events while asserting his identity as a soldier, he combines three narrative frameworks: portraying the war as an uncontrollable phenomenon, as described above; stressing the arbitrariness of military organisation and his own unsuitability and discomfort as a soldier (the rough language used in the Army seems

[420] Duckett, 1, 03.
[421] Duckett, 1, 09.
[422] Duckett, 1, 04-06.
[423] Laws, 2, 09.
[424] Freeman, 1, 06-09.

to have made a particular impression and is mentioned several times); and emphasising the level of danger he was in. His account is worth quoting at length:

> ...And...nothing much happened and then they came to me one day and they said, 'We understand you...understand water treatment', which I did, I'd done a little course. So they said, 'Well, you're still with the other three chaps guarding the unit', he said, 'but you're also in charge of the unit water truck'. So...they said, well he said, 'You must go out now and get that truck filled up with water, because we haven't got much'. So I said, 'Well where do I have to go?', and...'Oh', he said, 'It's only up the road'. He said, 'Go up the road onto the Bayeux-Caen road', and he said, 'You'll find it up there'. Well, being nineteen, very gullible, I did exactly what he said, and I got onto the Bayeux road and there was no sign of a water point or anything to do with water at all. And I decided that there was a lot of heavy gunfire in front of me in the Bayeux area, but I think Bayeux had fallen by that time, I can't be sure about that, but there was a lot of our troops around and there was a...a first aid marquee at the side of the road and I went in there and there was a load of casualties in there. Anyway they said, 'Well we don't know anything about water', he said, 'but if you go any further you'll be blown to pieces'. So I didn't fancy that idea at all, so...I turned round and went back down the road for about half a mile.
>
> I thought, 'Well I've still not got any water', but on the right-hand side of the road the ground fell away down into a shallow valley, and I sort of thought, 'Well there might be water down there', because there was pumps on the water truck, you could pump water in. So I turned down this road, and I'd only gone two or three hundred yards, and I could see some of the-, our lads lying on the bank at the side of the road. And the next thing I heard on the other side of the vehicle, a sergeant came, he was banging on the side of the door. So I spoke to him, and he said, 'Are you trying to commit suicide?'...[I was] nineteen years old, absolutely green. He said, 'If you go any further', he said, 'you'll run right into the Germans, and there's a Spandau down there'. He said, 'You'd better turn round and go back'. And I would emphasise at this point, he was speaking in the best army language that one could imagine. So I said, 'Well the road isn't wide enough to turn round, it's only a little track', sort of. He said, 'You back up the road, about ten, fifteen yards', and he said, 'There's a gap in the fence there and you'll find tank tracks into the field'. He said, 'You keep on the tracks and you can turn round', which I did. And just as I was starting to go back up the road I heard a thumping like you may thump the table, three or four times. I didn't know-, have a clue what it was. Anyway, long and short of it I went back to the camp where we were and I said, 'I can't find the water', and once again the chap in charge of the cook's wagon, he had a few more nice army words to say to me. But...he said, 'Where'd you get shot at?'. I

> said, 'I don't get shot at'. And he said, 'Well go round the back, have a look at the wagon'. And on the back of the tank is a steel cupboard, and you could see, I think it was about four or five dents where I'd been hit by Spandau fire, so of course I then realised once again, there's a war on here![425]

Thus, Freeman's first day on the mundane job of driving a water truck is turned into chaotic, confusing and death-defying excursion. Freeman continues to stress the level of danger he was in while describing the advance through France and Belgium after the Normandy breakout:

> It was constant driving, backwards and forwards and...the long range artillery was always trying to have a go at us, you see, and trying to block the road. Well they did once or twice. But their shooting wasn't all that accurate. But...the vehicle that I was driving...was hit several times by shrapnel. I was so lucky it never got me in the cab.[426]

While the majority of the interviewees describe this advance as an easy period, and a relief from the dire conditions in Normandy, Freeman describes it as the most dangerous period of his war. As well as the long-range artillery fire, he also participated in hunts for snipers left behind by the retreating Germans, and spends much time discussing these:[427]

> ...In a little Dutch village, don't know where it was...no I don't know where it was, but...Once again there was a sergeant who was very, very clever. I can't remember which unit he came from now, but he was an infantryman...with us. Can't remember...and I can't remember the village either, but the village was a T shape, the main road, if you can call it that, which would be less than a B-road as we know now, went off up the road, and the-, our unit stopped on the hill above, of all places, bloody stupid place to stop. Anyway they...they, I think one of the people, yeah that's right. Being on the hill they were silhouetted, and one of the snipers got one of the chaps, sergeant he was, and...killed him, so of course they got...got us infantry blokes and said 'Well the shot came from down in that village'. So we went back down, four or

[425] Freeman, 1, 10-16.
[426] Freeman, 1, 29-30.
[427] Freeman, 1, 20-24.

> five of us. There was a couple of the ordnance people came with us. But...as we went down this road, bear in mind it's a very narrow road, little cottages, terraced houses, and about...halfway through the village was a T-road, well it was a-, went into a little square on our right-hand side. And there was a...an old woman in one of the houses, and she came out and pointed into the corner of the square, and from what we could make out that's where the snipers were...that's right. So we went-, I was in front of our three, and I knelt down on my right knee, 'cos I was a left-handed shot. And I'd got the rifle poking round the corner ready to fire at these windows, but another shot came from somewhere, I don't know where it was, and it hit me on the knee. And...it was...it was quite painful. It only skimmed my kneecap, which was-, I was very, very lucky, but it just peeled the skin back off the kneecap and you could see the bone of the knee, but I was...I was in great pain over that, and they dragged me back from the corner of this building and they carried me back up to the camp. And...the funny thing was, there was no blood from this wound, none at all hardly, and they...I think it was the chap in charge of the stores, he came down and bound me leg up, you know, and that was me finished for a day or two.[428]

Undoubtedly, the sniper hunts were some of Freeman's most memorable and interesting experiences, and justify inclusion in his testimony for that reason; but they were also his main claim to the prestige of being a combat infantryman, especially since he was wounded in the process, and he eagerly returns to the subject later in the interview.[429]

Non-combatants therefore employ seemingly contradictory narrative strategies, acknowledging their privileged position of relative comfort and safety at the same time as attesting to the importance of their work, their proximity to danger and their right to share in the veteran identity. There is ultimately, even among rear-area troops a notion that their war service was something important and unique, which sets them apart from others. Like the rest, they imply distance between the fighting front and

[428] Freeman, 1, 24-28.
[429] Freeman, 2, 02-06.

the home front. Despite downplaying the importance of his own war work, Denis Laws still participated in commemorations and is scathing about those he perceives as dishonestly claiming the prestige afforded to veterans:

> DL: ...and we used to go over round about the June the sixth time, or...and...they always have celebrations through the town there, every year now. The trouble was that, they used to get quite a few Americans come over but when we were there a few years back there was a lot of yobbos dressed up in uniform and pretending to be soldiers. They weren't, and I-, I felt 'I don't want to get involved with this', so we...we normally used to leave before the June the sixth, but...a nice little town that, Saint-Mere-Eglise [sic], and...we used to normally spend a day or two there, before we set off down to...perhaps down to the...Perigord or somewhere, but...I couldn't understand these young fellas, they weren't ex-soldiers, they were just yobbos, dressed up in army surplus, pretending.
>
> ML: I've seen them.
>
> DL: And yet they were getting away with it.[430]

The ironic contrast between front-line combat and cushy life in the rear echelons seen in non-combatants' testimony can also be utilised by some who saw the most intense combat. After enlisting in February 1942 Luis Dimarco, a radioman in the Headquarters Company of 1st Parachute Battalion, spent more than two years preparing for a period in the front line which ultimately lasted only nine days. Unlike most combat formations, which spent months in fighting that ranged from low to high intensity, the 1st Airborne Division experienced combat which was comparatively much more intense but much more brief; this was especially true for Dimarco, who had avoided most of his unit's previous battles in North Africa and Italy. He arrived too late in Algeria to take part in the initial drops, missed the fighting in Tunisia as he was travelling by train with the

[430] Laws, 4, 02-04.

battalion's baggage, and was unable to drop on Sicily as his plane had to turn back due to engine trouble. He arrived in Italy at Taranto by ship, where enemy resistance was minimal, and there was the opportunity for training and relaxation before the battalion was withdrawn to England. He thus provides a series of anecdotes which present the period of training as an enjoyable one of amusing japes, drunken escapades with his mates, womanising and stretching the limits of his officers' tolerance for minor breaches of discipline, while his arrival in the Mediterranean was marked by monotonous camp life, plentiful rations, swimming in the sea and more drinking—the stuff of the rear-echelon's 'good war', not the front-line fighting of combat units.

This was all to change when the 1st Airborne landed at Arnhem on 17 September 1944. At this point, Dimarco's testimony becomes a minute-by-minute account of his actions at the battle of Arnhem which lasts for more than an hour and is unusual in several ways. The narrative clearly becomes more disjointed. He evidently places much importance on recollecting his movements correctly, and expresses frustration that there are gaps in his memory.[431] However, to have such a brief period to recall is a comparative luxury, as most cannot recall the numerous days of fighting which made up their war service in anything like as much detail. This preoccupation with providing a precise narrative may be an attempt to add a dispassionate aspect to a traumatic event. It is evident that in his short period in action Dimarco failed to come to terms

[431] Dimarco, 1, 62; 3, 108-110.

with casualties; while most eventually adopted a philosophical acceptance of losses, his attitude was to attempt to forget:

> ML: And when you thought about-, if you thought about Arnhem just after the war, is it the same, maybe because of lack of sleep, that it was disjointed, or...do you think it's now because of such a long time?
>
> LD: No, I don't think I-, I put it behind me, I don't think I-, you know, I was living my life, forget the war...It never stayed with me. Obviously, after Arnhem, it was with me for a while, obviously, but I...it soon went. I suppose again you push it out of your mind, and then over time it doesn't come back...[8][432]

Sticking to the emotionless facts may be one way of partially suppressing the disturbing aspects of remembering Arnhem. The contrast at the centre of Dimarco's account is unusual, and again arises almost completely from his personal circumstances rather than popular memory. Unlike the other interviewees who enjoyed generally 'good' wars, Dimarco at no point feels the need to stress the importance of or danger inherent in the rear-area work he was doing. Instead, by stressing the amount of time he spent enjoying himself during the war, the battle of Arnhem is presented contrastingly as an intense experience which in the end more than earnt Dimarco his veteran credentials.

The Importance of Individual Subjectivity

The interviewees demonstrate a range of strategies for translating their memories into spoken accounts. All demonstrate subjectivity throughout, but it is not shared collective subjectivity, but peculiar individual subjectivity, which is most apparent. Although popular memory is thought to be crucial to the theory of composure, it seems

[432] Dimarco, 2, 02-03.

to be of limited influence here. It has the—arguably critical—effect of delineating the boundaries of the conversations, and respondents usually find it useful to align their memories with popular discourses. However, popular representations are rarely drawn on as directly as many oral historians have argued is common in other contexts. The interviewees demonstrate a range of different narrative strategies, some of which are seemingly dissatisfying, although by and large this does not inhibit the testimony, demonstrating Peniston-Bird's point that 'discomposure is a reflection of honesty, not dissemblance, of negotiation, not complicity. It is a reminder that the individual is the best authority on their own experience'.[433] Moreover, the accounts are not informed primarily by popular memory, which is generally consistent, but by individual circumstances, experiences and character, which are much more varied. This explains why many of the same events and issues are discussed from many different standpoints, a fact that will remain evident throughout the rest of the thesis. Rather than repeating a shared understanding of the past, the interviewees seek to explain their own personal views of the past, often with the assistance of popular discourses, but sometimes without. This means that where the accounts do concur in spite of differing perspectives, this can be interpreted as enhancing the historical validity of the statements made. Before assessing the historical usefulness of the testimony, however, a further important influence on individual composure, trauma, must be assessed, and this is the subject of the next chapter.

[433] Peniston-Bird, 'Patriotism and the 'People's War'', p. 78.

Chapter 5
Trauma in Veterans' Testimony

In the popular imagination, soldiering and veterancy are inextricably linked with the psychological damage perceived to be an inevitable consequence of war experience. It is commonly claimed that war constitutes an experience wholly dissimilar in intensity, stress and horror to anything experienced in civilian life, 'by far the most traumatic "life event" that any human can experience, a damaging combination of danger, uncertainty and horror'.[434] Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder [PTSD] is a well-known, albeit often misunderstood, condition.[435] Any attempt to analyse veteran's testimony must therefore confront the debates over trauma and its influence on oral accounts.

Academic Approaches to Trauma

It is surprising that such a well-known issue as trauma, subject to such a strong consensus in popular discourse, is so poorly understood in academic research. In oral history, which often examines those such as survivors of genocide, refugees, and soldiers, who are likely to have been traumatised, trauma has been an unavoidable subject but one which has largely defied objective understanding. Partly, this confusion is a reflection of the state of the psychiatric research. Psychiatrists, too, have found it extremely difficult to produce coherent explanations for traumatic syndromes: 'It is because there is no Holy Grail or obviously right way of doing things

[434] McManners, *Scars of War*, pp. 2, 5; Winter, *Remembering War*, p. 62.
[435] Johnston, 'Culture, Combat and Killing', p. 260; Shephard, *War of Nerves*, p. xxi; Hautzinger and Scandlyn, *Beyond Post-Traumatic Stress*, p. 16.

that the subject [of military psychiatry] retains its interest and complexity.'[436] Nonetheless, it is concerning that major assessments of trauma in oral history struggle to properly define the term,[437] while some scholars have cited such confusion as a reason to abandon it altogether.[438]

This is not to say that trauma is uncharted territory for academics, ripe for exploration; on the contrary, the sociological and historical study of trauma is characterised by a concerning attachment to a 'discourse of the unrepresentable', in which 'The idea that any narrative reflects lives experience is rejected as naïve', and which brings into question the very possibility of discussing trauma.[439] While the study of trauma from the mid-nineteenth century onwards was essentially the study of war neuroses, the major focus since 1945 has been on survivors of the Holocaust,[440] and it is this focus on Holocaust experience which has driven the idea that trauma cannot be communicated to the non-traumatised. Naomi Rosh White writes that 'the Holocaust can never be written or spoken about directly…it is impossible to testify directly from inside the Holocaust world', and 'One is confronted with the implications of the limits of language'.[441] It is unclear, this being the case, why scholars attempt to write about the Holocaust at all, or whether any experience can be knowable to others.[442] As

[436] Jones and Wessely, *Shell Shock to PTSD*, p. xvi.
[437] Selma Leydesdorff, Graham Dawson, Natasha Burchardt and T. G. Ashplant, 'Introduction: Trauma and Life Stories', in Rogers and Leydesdorff (eds.), *Trauma*, pp. 1-26.
[438] Tim Cole, for instance, uses the terms 'difficult stories' or 'difficult pasts' instead, although the adjective 'traumatic' seems to be too apt for him to avoid: see Cole, '(Re)Placing the Past', pp. 30-49.
[439] James Berger, 'Trauma and Literary Theory', *Contemporary Literature*, 38/3 (1997), p. 573, quoted in Dodd, 'Childhood "Trauma"', pp. 39-40.
[440] Leydesdorff, Dawson, Burchardt and Ashplant, 'Introduction', in Rogers and Leydesdorff (eds.), *Trauma*, pp. 3-4.
[441] Naomi Rosh White, 'Marking Absences: Holocaust Testimony and History', in Perks and Thomson (eds.), *Oral History Reader*, First Edition, pp. 173-4.
[442] For a critique of such essentialist approaches see Evans, *In Defence of History*, pp. 213-215.

Joanna Bourke dryly notes, 'The trope of unspeakability is always negated the moment it is uttered…By naming "trauma", it is represented'.[443]

Some have also chafed at the reverential approach imposed by the tendency to equate 'a traumatised person with a victim who is awarded a high moral authority' or caricature perpetrators as 'omnipotent demons, scarcely human' while victims become 'single-dimensional cardboard cut-outs…relentlessly innocent'.[444] Mark Roseman, having used letters, diaries and memoirs to identify inaccuracies and distortions in one survivor's testimony, feels obliged to state that:

> where it *is* possible to compare survivor testimony with other sources, it is no disrespect to the survivors to do so. Such an exercise does not imply a wish to or an expectation of challenging the fundamental veracity of their testimony. On the contrary, it helps illuminate the very processes of memory which we are seeking to understand.[445]

The Holocaust has, of course, its own discursive culture which encourages certain narratives, so that 'what survivors originally attribute to the Holocaust often turns out—according to their own retelling—to have other life-historical roots, many having nothing to do with the genocide',[446] but much of Holocaust oral history is concerned more with deferentially reporting the 'unrepresentable' stories of survivors rather than analysing subjectivity in depth.

[443] Joanna Bourke, 'Why History Hurts', in Peter Leese and Jason Crouthamel (eds.), *Traumatic Memories of the Second World War and After* (London, 2016), pp. 285-6.
[444] Dodd, 'Childhood "Trauma"', p. 40; Bourke, 'Why History Hurts', p. 284.
[445] Roseman, 'Surviving Memory', in Perks and Thomson (eds.), *Oral History Reader*, pp. 230, 242. Original emphasis.
[446] Henry Greenspan, 'The Unsaid, the Incommunicable, the Unbearable, and the Irretrievable', *The Oral History Review*, 41/2 (2014), p. 231.

When the Vietnam War refocussed attention on the relationship between trauma and war, academic responses employed many of the same assumptions and drew many of the same conclusions as studies of the Holocaust: for instance, it was studies of concentration camp victims which first suggested trauma was something which could have a delayed effect on entire groups of people,[447] while critics of the war such as Robert Jay Lifton came to similar conclusions that 'speaking about trauma may, in some cases, prove altogether impossible'.[448] In Jay Winter's view anything that renders war tolerable or 'thinkable' must be misleading, because war is *always* intolerable and unthinkable.[449] In his formulation, there is a highly questionable tendency to treat war, combat, military service, repression, persecution and even genocide as phenomena which can be treated interchangeably in terms of morality, motivation and cause. Such conceptions risk downplaying the fact that, as Henry Greenspan has pointed out, 'even within survivors' anguish, there is a great range of *different* agonies that may or may not be bearable to recall and thus retell, for different survivors, at different times.'[450] In another recent study, Lindsey Dodd notes to similar effect that while 'individual responses to trauma depend on the context of the traumatic event and its interpretation', current understandings of trauma tend to negate individual subjectivity and establish 'a set of structures for remembering which exclude individuals whose experiences fall outside the grid'.[451] However, these recent acknowledgements of the range of possible reactions to trauma remain relatively

[447] Shephard, *War of Nerves*, pp. 359-61.
[448] Leydesdorff, Dawson, Burchardt and Ashplant, 'Introduction', in Rogers and Leydesdorff, *Trauma*, p. 13.
[449] Winter, *Remembering War*, p. 238-9.
[450] Greenspan, 'Unsaid', p. 239. Original emphasis.
[451] Dodd, 'Childhood "Trauma"', p. 39.

underdeveloped in comparison with the 'discourse of the unrepresentable'. It is still the case that 'much of conventional discussion of these issues reduces to some version of "trauma" making retelling either impossible or allowing it only in emotionless "depersonalised" ways [whereas] the actuality is enormously more complex'.[452]

Moreover, approaches drawn from Holocaust studies may function in that context but are not necessarily applicable to war veterans. Dori Laub frames the process of narrating trauma as a search for closure, in which the victim can 're-externalise' the event and re-evaluate it:

> The victim may have felt personally responsible for the traumatic event, or guilt over it having happened. Re-externalisation means that one "puts it back into the outside world where there is a perpetrator who one has not provoked, and who has carried out the atrocity, and should be held responsible and guilty for it"…There can be anger directed at the perpetrator, and no sense of guilt or responsibility for having taken part in it.[453]

This model simply cannot be transferred to traumatised soldiers, who are unavoidably active participants in the violence of combat,[454] usually willingly out of a sense of self-preservation and obligation to comrades, and who, if they refuse to participate and truly act as passive victims, risk shame and guilt at shirking their duty.[455] Current conceptions of trauma allow too little space for the fact that 'perpetrators may also be traumatised',[456] and this may, in fact, be an important motivation for veterans to downplay their agency in combat and visualise hostile action as a natural phenomenon

[452] Greenspan, 'Unsaid', p. 238.
[453] Dori Laub, personal communication, quoted in Mark Klempner, 'Navigating Life Review Interviews with Survivors of Trauma', in Perks and Thomson (eds.), *Oral History Reader*, p. 201.
[454] Suzanne Vees-Gulani, *Trauma and Guilt: Literature of Wartime Bombing in Germany* (Berlin, 2003), p. 20.
[455] Shephard, *War of Nerves*, pp. 221-4.
[456] Dodd, 'Childhood "Trauma"', p. 40.

which cannot truly be confronted. Causing veterans to acknowledge their trauma as inflicted by a human perpetrator may be counter-productive, reminding them that the violence they themselves inflicted was directed against other human beings and breaking down the metaphorical distancing which allows many to talk about their experiences. New approaches to war trauma incorporate ideas such as 'moral injury', which visualises trauma not as a matter of being victimised or psychologically damaged but of engaging in or witnessing actions which contradict the individual's 'core moral values and behavioral expectations of self or others', resulting in shame and disillusionment.[457] However, such concepts remain novel and are yet to be adequately incorporated into oral history. There is a need for better theory to explain how veterans' traumatic narratives function.

Understanding Trauma Among Veterans

This study does not purport to resolve the disputes over how psychological trauma should be understood: the concern here is with its effect on testimony, which has proved a more fruitful avenue for research. Gadi BenEzer, for instance, has identified thirteen narrative 'trauma signals', which have been applied by scholars such as Lindsey Dodd.[458] 'Trauma' seems a useful term, provided it is understood merely as the *posited* psychiatric consequences of war or combat, which undeniably do exist, even though it lacks both a solid aetiology or a consistent set of symptoms. Graham Dawson's definition is as good as any: 'the psychological impact of some violent or

[457] 'What is Moral Injury', *The Moral Injury Project*, < http://moralinjuryproject.syr.edu/about-moral-injury/> [accessed February 2018]. For a critique see Susan Derwin, 'Moral Injury: Two Perspectives', in Leese and Crouthamel (eds.), *Traumatic Memories*, pp. 269-289.
[458] BenEzer, 'Trauma Signals', in Rogers and Leydesdorff (eds.), *Trauma*, pp. 29-44; Dodd, 'Childhood "Trauma"', pp. 37-48.

otherwise shocking event, producing deep-rooted effects which are difficult to come to terms with'.[459] The inherent selection bias in this study, which only included those who were willing to talk about the war, precludes any evaluation of the prevalence of trauma among veterans. However, those who refuse to discuss the war are not relevant here: this study is concerned solely with those who *do* discuss the war, and how trauma affects *their* testimony. This is an essentially descriptive matter which is much easier to assess than how the trauma itself functions.

That said, some attention must be paid to the current understanding of war trauma, because this provides the essential cultural context in which the veterans provided their testimony. Most important is the consensus on the existence of PTSD, which entered the third edition of the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III) in 1980. PTSD describes a condition in which a traumatic experience results in re-experiencing of the event through dreams and flashbacks, along with other symptoms such as depression, irritability and hyper-vigilance which can hinder the sufferer's ability to function socially. PTSD was developed to describe the problems experienced by American veterans of the Vietnam War after they returned home. Psychiatric casualties in Vietnam were in fact extremely low, and it was not until after the war had ended, in the fraught atmosphere of post-Vietnam America, that it came to be viewed as a psychiatric failure.[460] Ending the Vietnam War was an overt and well-intentioned aim of campaigners for the recognition

[459] Graham Dawson, 'Trauma, Memory and Politics: The Irish Troubles', in Rogers and Leydesdorff (eds.), *Trauma*, p. 184.
[460] Ibid., pp. 129, 212; Edgar Jones and Simon Wessely, 'Psychiatry and the "Lessons of Vietnam": What Were They, and Are They Still Relevant?', *War and Society*, 22/1 (2004), pp. 90-1; Shephard, *War of Nerves*, pp. 349-53.

of PTSD,[461] and this meant that the condition entered the psychiatric canon obliquely, without a basis in detailed research:

> Despite the limited nature of the evidence, the existence of any veterans who were alienated, angry or disaffected was considered compelling. These were essentially clinical observations, which by their very nature, cannot be used to generalise to the entirety of the veteran's experience of Vietnam. Yet that is precisely what occurred.[462]

Almost all studies into PTSD followed rather than preceded its recognition in DSM-III,[463] but by the time this research, with its ambiguous findings, began to appear, 'the media and Hollywood stereotype of the Vietnam veteran as a person who had become traumatised and marginalised by their service, rejected by society, prone to antisocial behaviour including drug taking and violence, and most probably suffering from severe psychopathology, had taken root.'[464] The perception of the Vietnam War as an immoral war which victimised soldiers as much as it did civilians curiously led veterans—even those who had never seen combat or gone to Vietnam—to admit to committing atrocities which had never taken place.[465] PTSD ultimately had as much to do with the social climate of 1970s America as it did with the Vietnam War itself.[466] A significant feature of PTSD is that, for the first time, war *alone* was blamed, rather than pre-existing character or psychological flaws being considered a contributing factor to long-term psychiatric conditions;[467] this made the condition more acceptable and broadened the number of possible victims, especially once it was also

[461] Jones and Wessely, *Shell Shock to PTSD*, p. 211.
[462] Jones and Wessely, 'Psychiatry and the "Lessons of Vietnam"', p. 95.
[463] Jones and Wessely, *Shell Shock to PTSD*, pp. 131, 135.
[464] Jones and Wessely, 'Psychiatry and the "Lessons of Vietnam"', p. 97; Shephard, *War of Nerves*, pp. 365-6.
[465] Ibid., p. 96, n. 27; Wessely, 'Twentieth-Century Theories on Combat Motivation and Breakdown', pp. 280-1.
[466] Jones and Wessely, *Shell Shock to PTSD*, p. 212.
[467] Wessely, 'Combat Motivation and Breakdown', pp. 281-2.

acknowledged that even those who had survived battle with no mental ill-effects could experience symptoms at a later date.[468] In society in general, PTSD seemed to herald the opportunity for long-suppressed traumas to be revealed, discussed, and potentially resolved.

A common impression therefore exists that the process of understanding war trauma began in the First World War, proceeded in a linear fashion, and was completed with the 'discovery' of PTSD after the Vietnam War.[469] However, it is more accurate to say that each conflict motivated its own particular theories and advances, of which PTSD is only the most recent, reflective of current cultural and social trends, equally temporary and transient, and in no way definitive.[470] As Edgar Jones, Simon Wessely, and Patrick J. Bracken have convincingly argued, there is little reason to believe that a 'universal trauma reaction' exists.[471] It is more accurate to say PTSD was constructed, to describe a particular set of symptoms, than discovered, and 'It is a mistake to assume that because PTSD has a case definition…then this "proves" the existence of the disorder as an independent entity.'[472] Traumatic syndromes are mediated by culture, as 'human reactions to adversity are subject to immense cultural shaping',[473] and it is only in the context of late-twentieth and early twenty-first century Western society that the syndrome known as PTSD has come about.

[468] Jones and Wessely, *Shell Shock to PTSD*, p. 138.
[469] Wessely, 'Combat Motivation and Breakdown', pp. 269-70.
[470] Ibid., p. 286; Shephard, *War of Nerves*, p. xxii; Bracken, 'Post-Modernity and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder', pp. 733-4.
[471] Jones and Wessely, *Shell Shock to PTSD*, pp. 173-4, Bracken, 'Post-Modernity and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder', pp. 733-5, 742.
[472] Jones and Wessely, *Shell Shock to PTSD*, p. 171.
[473] Ibid., p. 173; Bracken, 'Post-Modernity and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder', p. 742.

This is evidenced by the intriguing range of symptoms which have arisen from war trauma throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—most of which 'were simply not the same as PTSD'.[474] Soldiers of the American Civil War experienced lethargy and apparent heart conditions. First World War shell shock was characterised by psychosomatic symptoms (those arising in the mind but manifesting in physical symptoms) such as tics, tremors, headaches, fatigue and what became known as 'Disordered Action of the Heart', as well as nightmares and amnesia.[475] In the Second World War somatic syndromes were reduced compared with psychoneurotic ones such as anxiety, although partially this seems to have been a result of diagnostic decisions. High levels of dyspepsia, although attributed to army life, could have been psychosomatic in nature, especially since peptic ulcer was a widely feared condition.[476] PTSD, meanwhile, is characterised almost entirely by psychic symptoms, particularly flashbacks. These were exceedingly rare among First- and Second World War veterans, and Jones and Wessely suggest that 'cinema and video technology have exercised an important influence on the organisation of memory by providing new templates for expressing distress'.[477] However, this does not mean that physical symptoms have disappeared: 'Gulf War syndrome' appears to be related to fears around toxins such as sarin gas and depleted uranium.[478] Jones and Wessely found that while these various conditions were not necessarily confined to particular wars, there was an association between particular wars and particular conditions.[479] They

[474] Ibid., p. 735.
[475] Jones and Wessely, *Shell Shock to PTSD*, p. 193.
[476] Ibid., pp. 195-8. A similar trend was identified by German doctors: see Shephard, *War of Nerves*, p. 306.
[477] Jones and Wessely, *Shell Shock to PTSD*, p. 174.
[478] Ibid., p. 207.
[479] Ibid., pp. 206-7.

argue that war neuroses should be classified as medically unexplained syndromes which can cause a range of culturally-mediated physical conditions through no simple biomedical cause.[480] Consequently, there is little reason to assume that PTSD can be extrapolated to encompass past conflicts, or to assume that the Second World War veterans interviewed for this study experienced modern PTSD; although some studies have done just this.[481]

A further important point is that wartime trauma does not *inevitably* lead to lasting psychiatric disorder: as Ben Shephard notes, enthusiasm over PTSD has obscured the basic fact that 'not everyone *does* suffer in the wake of trauma'.[482] It is possible to acknowledge the horrific nature of combat and the life-changing legacy of military service while also drawing the crucial distinction 'between the vast majority of combat veterans, who may continue to have troubled memories of war for the rest of their lives, but function perfectly well in all spheres of life, and the minority who have psychiatric disorder that impedes social, family and occupational function.'[483] While the precise proportion is notoriously hard to measure, Jones and Wessely cite a study of former Harvard students which found only 5 of 256 veterans had any symptoms of PTSD, and of the 152 who had been in combat, most suffered no lasting psychological ill-effects—'The memory of combat appeared to have been indelibly imprinted in many men's lives but this did not appear to have…seriously impaired their functioning'.[484]

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[480] Ibid., p. 191.
[481] Nigel Hunt and Ian Robbins, 'The Long-Term Consequences of War: The Experience of World War II', *Aging and Mental Health*, 5/2 (2001), pp. 183-4.
[482] Shephard, *War of Nerves*, p. 391. Original emphasis.
[483] Jones and Wessely, 'Psychiatry and the "Lessons of Vietnam"', p. 96, n. 29; Jones and Wessely, *Shell Shock to PTSD*, p. 181; Johnston, 'Culture, Combat and Killing', p. 257.
[484] K. Lee, G. Vaillant, W. Torrey and G. Elder, 'A 50-year Prospective Study of the Psychological Sequelae of World War II Combat', *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 152 (1995), pp. 516-522, cited in Jones and Wessely, *Shell Shock to PTSD*, pp. 181-2. One likely reason these veterans coped so well

Nigel Hunt and Ian Robbins found that nineteen per cent of their sample of 731 Second World War and Korean War veterans reported the rather broad criterion of 'war-related psychological distress' after fifty years.[485] It seems clear that those with full-blown psychiatric conditions are certainly in the minority.

Here it is also useful to draw a distinction between Combat Stress Reaction (CSR) and PTSD; although they are often incorrectly equated, the former is a short-term condition experienced during or immediately after combat, the latter a long-term one which can arise many years after the traumatic event occurred.[486] CSR is a strong predictor of later PTSD, but PTSD may develop in someone who never experienced CSR at the time of the original trauma.[487] Nor is it the case that since CSR and PTSD correlate, more than a minority of cases of CSR develop into PTSD: 'If a person comes home from their war service psychologically robust, the chances are that they will remain robust'.[488] It is not necessarily the case that CSR can be applied to the Second World War either, as like PTSD it is also culturally mediated; it merely serves to demonstrate that the relation between traumatic reactions which occur in combat and those which develop later in life is not a straightforward one.

It should not be assumed that all or most war veterans are psychologically damaged, or that there is a simple correlation between the intensity of combat experienced and

was their high socio-economic status; this illustrates how war experiences are rarely the sole cause of psychiatric conditions.

[485] Hunt and Robbins, 'Long-Term Consequences of War', p. 188.
[486] Johnston, 'Culture, Combat and Killing', p. 261.
[487] Jones and Wessely, *Shell Shock to PTSD*, p. 176.
[488] Ibid., p. 184.

the intensity of psychological problems. Reading the literature on war psychiatry, it is easy to forget that the damaged veterans under discussion are a minority.

The Prevalence of Trauma in Second World War Veterans' Narratives

Hugh McManners has written that:

> After the Second World War the members of an entire generation were personally affected by their experiences. Afterwards, they put the war behind them and concentrated on winning the peace—no mean task. They were all in it together, and this may partly explain the reluctance with which they as individuals admit to having been adversely affected by it…Perhaps an entire generation were burnt out by the emotional experiences of the Second World War, never to regain their zest and youthfulness?...Today, psychiatrists are discovering that the suppressed emotions of the war generation are giving way to a very delayed PTSD, forty years on…Many Second World War veterans are seeking medical help with PTSD problems now, as their memories catch up with them.[489]

The veterans interviewed for this study simply do not reflect this assessment. Indeed, their frankness in discussing traumatic experiences stands in sharp contrast to the popular assumption that veterans never talk about their wars. Most of the veterans willing to be interviewed experienced things they would rather forget, but are happy to discuss them, and few, even those who evidently suffered short-term 'battle exhaustion', show any indications of lasting psychological problems or difficulty speaking. On the contrary, the testimony examined here is often extremely direct, often to the point of being uncomfortable to hear. Multiple accounts demonstrate this. Geoff Young recalls discovering civilians who had been caught in the crossfire:

> So I carried on into this village, and a lady, German lady, came and stopped me, so...and I was with the company commander as well then. She said, 'Could you help?', in German, and of course she spoke a bit of

[489] McManners, *Scars of War*, pp. 9-14.

> English, 'Could you help me?' So, company commander said, 'Look Geoff, you look out, now you watch out, I'm gonna- I'll watch on, you see, and you watch out', so she took me to a bungalow, about fifty yards away, and in the bungalow was a small boy ten years of age, she told me he was ten, and he was laid on the bed, two legs gone, blood, and I saw the trail of blood going out and one of our tanks had fired, saw movement, and there was a father and three children there. The mother was going to go, she'd locked up the-, she told me she'd locked the door to go afterwards, and up went this...It was the worst thing I've ever seen, they were all killed, but this ten year old boy was on the outside and she carried him, you saw the blood going up into the bungalow, and I didn't honestly know what to do, 'cos I had to get on, and all I had was a few words, and I could say was 'entschuldigung bitte', 'excuse me', was all I could say [laughs], I couldn't do anything about it. There was nobody else in the village, only four German soldiers...[10] That was...that was bad.[490]

Eric Tipping describes witnessing the death of a comrade at close range, after his platoon had been pinned down in an ambush:

> So, we were just absolutely-, you couldn't move. And...and they continued firing too, so...Smithy's dad said to me 'What can we do Tip?'. I said 'I'm not sure yet what we can do, at all'. And at that...somebody was crying out, like, 'I'm bleeding to death, I'm dying, I'm dying', one of our chaps or something...So I could hear Smithy next to me, he said 'What can we do?'. I said 'Hang on, *I don't know yet*.' He said 'We've got to help them out that's wounded', I said 'I know but', I said, 'if you move you've had it', I could tell, whether he couldn't see the bullets, but I was on the end here and the way my head was I could see the, see the bullets coming, and I knew if I'd have lifted...Anyway, for some unknown reason, I don't know why, he lifted his head...I mean he only just, whether he was going to go forward or not I don't know, but he lifted his head, and he got hit straight in the throat, shot in the throat, and I knew from the sound he made that it was fatal. And I tried to whatsname, I said 'Smithy, Smithy', I got no reply, so I shouted [for] stretcher bearers, and eventually they came and confirmed he was dead...[491]

Robert Purver remembers his unit being shelled by friendly artillery:

[490] Young, 1, 48-50.
[491] Tipping, 1, 90-91.

> My particular unit, B Company [5/Wiltshires], was instructed to take this hill, and I got the impression now that the hill was called 361...We went up at night time and by dawn we had reached almost to the summit of this hill, and we was told to stop, and we stopped there in a farm track, and on the top of this hill it was a bald hill with a field, and by dawn...the artillery opened up to lay a stonk in front of us, that's what the idea was. The trouble was, it landed right in amongst us, and...I lost six of my section, they got badly wounded. One bloke, I won't name his name for fear of the family, had his head blown off completely, so we didn't know what the body was until we took his paybook out and found out who it was, this young lad, his head was blown off completely, but anyway...[492]

Bill Edwardes recalls consoling the fatally wounded:

> But the times also when you were in similar situations with wounded, them saying to you, 'Oh god, put me out of my misery, shoot me, shoot me', and because we didn't carry our weapons, I think according to regulations we were supposed to, but again you had to sling them because they were little Sten guns and they would swing round and get in the way anyway, but it was a good reason not to be...to be able to say to a guy, 'I'm sorry, I can't do it, I don't have a weapon'. 'Use my rifle'. 'No I can't do that, it's...', and you then try to console them, and even if they, you know, don't ask to be wiped out, you console them, you say, 'Ah you lucky bugger, you've got a blighty, you'll be home before tea time', knowing full well probably within an hour they'd be dead. But you had to just cope with it and get unpersonal about it.[493]

Ian Hammerton, commander of a troop of flail tanks, felt obliged to discover the fate of a missing subordinate:

> ML: Now before Le Havre you were telling me earlier you'd found out what had happened to your corporal...that had gone off the road [during Operation TOTALIZE].
>
> IH: Yes...Many years later-, no, sorry...Three days after the start of the night attack, may have been four days, my squadron commander said 'Don't go and look at the tank', but I...they were my chaps, so I went, and I found they'd been through a bit of a minefield, they'd broken the track, and a self-propelled gun had fired an AP shell right through the tank from side to side. Although a small fire had started there was still petrol in the tanks. There was still petrol in 1947, when I went back again...but the first time, I looked in through the turret, or through the

[492] Purver, 1, 12-13.
[493] Edwardes, 1, 85-86.

> driver's hatchway, which was open, and all that was left of the co-driver and the driver was from the middle downwards, just their legs, and it was a seething mass of maggots...so, I've never forgotten that, obviously.[494]

All of these incidents were evidently impactful and highly disturbing at the time and remained so throughout the rest of the veteran' lives; none were recalled with relish, and trauma is potentially evidenced by hesitancy, changes in tone and nervous laughter. Yet none clearly demonstrate any of BenEzer's 'trauma signals', and evidently none of these disturbing experiences were 'untellable'.

Some actively emphasise disturbing experiences. For Jack Eglington, who drove a Universal Carrier in 4/Somerset Light Infantry, a key memory was witnessing two men being killed at very close range by an armour-piercing shell during the fighting on Hill 112. Far from trying to forget this, Eglington was in fact in contact with the son of one of the men. This is described very early in the interview, along with several other disturbing incidents:

> ...I joined up April [1938] and went all through the war...unscathed, never had nothing wrong with-, no, a few, a few near misses, I'm just writing that letter now because it missed me by that much and killed the other two...on the other side [of] the carrier, officer and a wireless operator, killed them, I'm just trying to write this letter to his [son] now to explain what happened, how he [was] killed, but it's [a] bit of a job I mean, between you and me when I looked at 'em they had all of their inside blown out, both of 'em, and they were backing heads like this...but I can't tell him that really, I'll have to describe it sort of a bit different, but...that was it, and then I, another time I was driving along up near the...Reichswald Forest, and...there was a Bren gun carrier. Well, being a bit nosy, I, I thought to myself-, I was on me own, I don't know why or...I was on me own driving, and I thought 'Ooh I'll stop and have a look in there', see if there's any junk in there you could pinch or anything like that. The only thing I saw in there was a bloke's leg, complete leg in there...After I pulled away I thought, 'That's a bit stupid', he had his leg blown off, maybe there were some mines around there, but you don't

[494] Hammerton, 1, 82-84.

> think see, you don't think in that time, do these sloppy things. And...another time, that was the Reichswald Forest, yeah, we we captured a, one of, no...one of our blokes got wounde-, shot, between where we were, a copse, and the edge of the forest, got shot, one of-, they sent a Bren gun carrier down to pick him up, with a stretcher bearer, and...they shot the stretcher bearer. So, of course our blokes were real right mad, but in the meantime they captured a, a young German, about sixteen, and they, they were gonna shoot him, see, so I, I said 'no no no no', I said- this young lad, he was crying and showing us photographs of his mum and dad and all the rest of it, I said 'No no no no', I said 'You can't, no no don't shoot him', and I often wonder to this day if that bloke knew that I really and truly saved his life, although he was a German but...you, you just can't do, some things you can't do, some things you can't do, you know, but I'm sure if I'd been there when he was shot and...they was so mad about it, but...I dunno, it's one of them things I suppose, facts of war...[495]

Eglington too shows a certain amount of agitation—one can almost observe him composing his narrative while speaking—but like the others demonstrates none of BenEzer's 'trauma signals'. He returns to the key incident on Hill 112 several times, as well as recollecting other occasions of witnessing shattered limbs and the dead crews of burnt-out tanks.[496] Evidently these sights were imprinted on Eglington's memory, but he discusses them freely and at no point breaks down.

It is questionable how deeply affected Eglington was by these disturbing events, but in addition to the remarkable ability of the veterans to come to terms with and later calmly talk about disturbing and potentially traumatic incidents, in several cases there is clear-cut evidence that experiences which were traumatic in the most obvious sense, which resulted in actual psychological breakdown during the war, can also later be discussed with relative ease. In each of these cases, the breakdown is acknowledged somewhat obliquely, but not concealed. Tom Dutton's occurred during a period of line-

[495] Eglington, 1, 02-04.
[496] Eglington, 1, 9-13, 20-21; 2, 00-02.

holding near the Reichswald, while he and his trench-mate were preparing to go out at dusk and man their slit trench, as they did every night. Dutton builds up tension before this in a lengthy description which evokes a predictable and relatively comfortable routine but also implies a gradual build-up of stress due to the proximity of the enemy and unpredictable mortar fire. The breakdown was presaged in particular by a night patrol two days prior in which Dutton recalls being the most scared he had ever been.[497]

> So, this evening come along and we'd had our tot and we'd had our orders and we'd got to go out and hope it'd be a quiet night and dash down and jump into our slit-, anyway, this night it was quiet, mortar bombs-, we could hear mortar bombs going in other areas, but, but this...So he said, 'Are you alright Tom', this bloke said, I said 'Aah mate', he said, 'Shall we go?' I was just about to make a dash when two bloody great explosions on the building up above me. Must have been eighty-eights, they come so fast, and all the debris falling…Frightened the living daylights out of me, I shit blue lights I did. I fell down and me rifle went anywhere and the bit was falling all on the back of me legs and all of a sudden I felt somebody grab hold of me legs and drag me in. He said, 'Bloody hell!', he said, 'What happened there?' I said, 'Well I dunno...I think it were bloody eighty-eights, took half the building down! Anyway, shattered me nerves, it done me in, and the chap said, this lance corporal said, 'Give me your Bren magazines and your grenades', he said. 'I'll go out with Whitey', he said, 'and take your job for the night'.[498]

Dutton was wrapped in a blanket and given a mug of tea, before being sent to the rear to recover:

> Then this officer said, 'And what I want you to do', he said, 'is take this man Dutton to the regimental aid post', he said, 'He's had a bit of a time up here', he said, 'and he ain't no good to me as he is'. I said, 'Alright then'...[7] So they took me back and took me to the hospital and I had...treatment, suppose you could call it psychiatric treatment really couldn't you? Don't remember much about it. It was like an old monastery, the hospital, it was nurses and some of them was

[497] Dutton, 1, 47-56.
[498] Dutton, 1, 56-57.

> poor...wrecks, you know, poor chaps. I thought, 'Christ, has I come to this?' Anyway they got me fit.[499]

Dutton's description of his recovery is brief, and a sense of shame at his personal failure may well account for this, just as it explains the way he distances himself from the other psychiatric casualties and stresses the fact that, even though he was medically downgraded and therefore could not return to his unit, he retained his Worcestershire Regiment cap badge.[500] This feeling seems more likely a matter of culture—a common sense of guilt at letting down the military group which had become the focus of his entire life—rather than necessarily indicating any long-term psychological wound.[501]

John Majendie presents a similar but even more dramatic example. He had clearly reflected on the war extensively, and one of the themes of his account is correcting misconceptions. A special concern, which Majendie calls his 'hobby horse', is disputing the idea that anyone can be held responsible for what occurs in chaotic battle situations, and it is while describing this that his key traumatic experience is first mentioned:

> But, the only time I ever had a letter published in the paper, I...a few years ago I wrote to the Daily Telegraph about friendly fire, which irritates me enormously because, there's no such thing as friendly fire, people fired in order to hit somebody, they didn't do it for a friendly way. They, the journalists love getting hold of this...and I quoted, and I remember four occasions in our own battalion within the space of a very short time of friendly fire, none of them were reported further back than battalion headquarters and I think...at least one of them wasn't even reported that far, it, it's bound to happen, people get shot...I know myself I shot a, one of our own chaps...I was told there's a Boche up that tree over there, I could see him...[4] He came down, and I

[499] Dutton, 1, 59.
[500] Dutton, 1, 59-61.
[501] Shephard, *War of Nerves*, pp. 221-4.

> discovered afterwards that he wasn't, he was one of our snipers, and the extraordinary thing, looking back in my head, I thought he was a Boche, I had no feeling of...success, or wasn't that a good shot, or a lucky shot, or anything. Completely...as if somebody had said, 'Oh, throw that stone into the river and watch it splash' sort of thing, extraordinary. We had a...when we were digging in over the road that night and D company had the debacle and the chap hit in his...paunch,[502] some of their blokes came back in front of us, and the leading platoon, Bren gunner, saw these shadowy figures, they were in the wrong place, weren't supposed to be there, shot them all...I don't think we even reported that...we had casualties on the start line of Jupiter from our own guns...it happened all the time, and they get hold of it now, they always want to blame somebody...I bet at the Battle of Hastings the archers up the front had arrows in the back of their necks from the blokes behind...The other thing is, funnily enough the same day, that I had this letter published in the Telegraph somebody wrote about inquests, why they have inquests, a chap gets blown to bits by a mine in Afghanistan and then they have an inquest back here, accidental death, well...and the chap wrote and said, 'What would happen if they'd had after the Somme...they'd still be having them now.' It doesn't do anybody any good...[503]

Majendie admits to shooting a fellow British soldier in very candid terms, with no prompting or persuasion required. Undoubtedly, being able to relate the incident to his larger aim of telling the 'real story' and busting misconceptions was helpful—indeed, the traumatic event may have been the motivation for this narrative tactic. Majendie returns to the incident later, to explain his breakdown and evacuation during the fighting near Briquessard just prior to Operation BLUECOAT:

> The moment we started the...very very close country, these sort of tiny fields...there were casualties from...you couldn't tell where they were coming from, people were getting shot and I got to the hedge into a field to try and see what was going on, and I think I laid down with my field glasses to look, and a chap, interesting a pi-, an ex pilot officer from the RAF, the RAF had a sup-, a lot of superfluous flying people and they drafted them straight into the infantry, and we had actually two in the company, and he came running up to me, and said there's a... And then

[502] Majendie here refers to an oft-reported incident, described in Sydney Jary's *18 Platoon* and also mentioned by Bill Partridge, where a bullet hit and detonated a phosphorous grenade attached to one man's webbing during a night attack on Hill 112.
[503] Majendie, 1, 35-38.

> there was a...crack [claps] and a puff of dust where he was hit and he went down, poor chap screaming his head off, and...for a moment you're just sort of stuck almost dumb. Anyway I helped him off with his equipment and...he managed to make his way back to the hedge for the stretcher bearers, and I picked up the rest of his equipment and ammo and stuff and went back, and I called a, an O Group as they called it, and...I don't remember a great deal, what I know is that my second-in-command, a chap called John Scammell, who became an army padre eventually, he was very badly wounded on Mont Pinçon, he said to me...I remember I was giving orders out of some sort, he said 'Are you feeling okay', and I said 'Well I am a bit, feeling a bit woolly', he said 'Would you like me to carry on for you', and I said 'Yeah, fine', and anyway we advanced on down through...and that was there this chap said to me, 'There's a bloody- a Boche up that tree there', about a couple of hundred yards away, and we all, I'd armed myself with a...rifle from a dead Fifteenth Scottish [Division] soldier, when we took over, lots of weapons around we'd all armed ourselves with rifles and bayonets, and lucky shot, the chap came down, never-, I didn't have any feeling at all. Subsequently I was told he was a, one of our snipers, and...I'm told that, I think the...CO or somebody said or sent for John Scammell, I can't remember what happened and...I went back to see the CO and we came under a very heavy stonk there and I don't remember a great deal but they all went to ground and I stayed sitting on the bank watching it. And I think one had gone a bit...anyways I went back to the MO and he gave me a shot...pills or something and I know I slept for twenty-three hours, that's non-stop, and I think, in retrospect, if I'd had a few days of sort of...rest, relaxation, but...then I saw another doctor and they put me into a hospital at Bayeux and then they banged me back home and I had six weeks in hospital...[504]

The fact that Majendie uses similar phrasing both of the times he describes shooting the British sniper indicates that he was able to achieve composure: this is no traumatic intrusion but a well-rehearsed part of Majendie's life story. His case appears to be a typical result of extreme strain which allowed the wounding of the ex-pilot, the friendly-fire incident and the artillery 'stonk' together to trigger the breakdown. Majendie is typically contemplative:

> ...when you, it's very easy to be wise after the event, I think the trouble is we were all...knackered through lack of sleep...when you're that age

[504] Majendie, 1, 59-63.

> you do need your sleep, I don't think, I didn't get any sleep the night before, and...we were in...a private house by this...little chapel and I think one had about...several nights with a...minimal sleep and it all catches up and I suppose one has a ration of...[4] and when the ration's run out, you need renewing...It's almost...been on my conscience ever since because I've wanted to get back again...[505]

It seems likely that Majendie's ability to think calmly and carefully about his war in this way is vital to his achievement of composure. Yet this is not totally successful and, like Dutton, a feeling of guilt for failing to keep going is evident.

Doug Mayman likewise describes a particularly difficult day in which, if he did not suffer a sudden breakdown, the effects of battle fatigue and the benefits of some time spent out of the line to recover are heavily implied.[506] Mayman's achievement of composure, just like Majendie's, seems heavily dependent on incorporating the trauma within his main argument about the improved conditions compared with the First World War. The fact these men who apparently became psychiatric casualties during the war could talk about this frankly in their old age confounds popular assumptions about the unrepresentability of trauma and provides further evidence that that breakdowns in combat do not necessarily lead to long-term psychiatric problems or inhibit narration.

Two of the interviewees did show clear signs of emotional discomposure due to trauma, as would be regarded as predictable. However, they nonetheless both make the effort to speak. Stan Procter's interview is the most straightforward. For the

[505] Majendie, 1, 63-64.
[506] Mayman, 1, 19-24.

majority of the interview he is well-composed, though he seems to dwell on the deaths of friends from early in the interview:

> ...a friend of mine in the signals was in a-, he was with the artillery, and he was in a scout car like mine, just a few yards away and a...thing dropped right into his and killed him. Dick...oh I've forgotten his-, I know his name but it'll come to me sometime, and that was my really-...No, the first...casualty I remember was when we were stuck in these ditches and somebody came up to me and said-, oh, I wish I could remember names, old thingummybob's just been killed, and he was a young friend of mine, you know, and this was within the first two or three days, so...wasn't a good start.[507]

However, it is only when questioned directly about dealing with casualties that Procter becomes outwardly emotional:

> ML: So how did...casualties affect you? You've already mentioned some friends being killed.
>
> SP: Yeah. Well...I think, I can't remember thinking anything other than, 'My God, that's what it's all about', you know, 'it's gonna happen'. I'm sorry to lose but it didn't, I don't know, it's very extraordinary though [bangs table], I can't quite figure how I thought. I mean I didn't get-, it didn't get me dejected for some reason, I don't know why, but that's it.
>
> ML: And have you ever thought about it after the war?
>
> SP: What I remember of being- friends being killed? Yes I have...[6] [bangs table] Stop.
>
> ML: Sorry.[508]

After the interviewer changes the subject, Procter quickly regains his composure and continues in the same matter-of-fact way for the remainder.

The other example is Ray Gordon, who served as a Churchill tank loader/operator in 9th Royal Tank Regiment; his account is more unusual and worth assessing at length,

[507] Procter, 1, 07-08.
[508] Procter, 1, 24-25.

because the trauma he experienced is the main event of his war narrative and, far from hindering his composure, forms the basis of it. Gordon's tank was knocked out mere days after his arrival in France, during his first major engagement in Operation EPSOM. He was the only survivor and was badly burned. The fact that Gordon's campaign experience was so short and culminated in one key traumatic event evidently had major effects on the way he relates it. The interview starts with a longer-than-usual discussion of training, since Gordon does not have much actual campaigning to talk about. This part of the interview focuses on two themes, the naïvety and enthusiasm of the young recruits—there is little suggestion the training was particularly arduous—and the good *esprit de corps* and inter-rank relations, demonstrated especially by Gordon's description of his tank's commander:

> ...I was in A Squadron and I was put into 2 Troop...and we had a sergeant in charge of us, Sergeant Jock Smith....He really had come from Scotland, I can't tell you whereabouts now, and he was a lovely man...here am I at...aged eighteen, nineteen, and he I suppose would have been about thirty-five, and he was like a father to us, he really was, he was a lovely man, and really respected by his crews...his crew...[509]

Gordon's first description of arriving in Normandy continues these themes. He first discusses the attitude of his crew:

> ML: So what's going through your mind at this time?
>
> RG: Isn't life exciting? Well you're eighteen, and...it's an adventure. You're going abroad! You've landed in France! So then you think, 'Oh...the Germans are here, aren't-, oh, gotta be careful'...[laughs]. I know it sounds silly...[510]

[509] Gordon, 1, 06.
[510] Gordon, 1, 23.

This is then followed by a description of some German troops who were captured, who appeared to Gordon and his mates to be even younger than they were.[511] At this point, Gordon requests a break, and on resuming the interview talks about his feelings on arriving in Normandy again; this time, he more strongly emphasises that his positivity took little account of the very real danger:

> I think what one has to realise now is that at this particular time in my life, I, and several others of course, apart from the tank commander, were just boys aged eighteen, and therefore...this was a wonderful adventure as far as you as an individual was concerned. Going across in the boat, to start with, was exciting, and landing on France, and you think 'We're going to meet some Germans soon, isn't it going to...[laughs]...isn't it going to be exciting!' Of course, at eighteen, you...and I think all eighteen-year-olds are like this, nothing will ever happen to you, it will happen to everyone else, but never to you, but life proves that's not a true statement by any manner or mean, but there you are, you're full of hope, you know you're going to get through, and I think this is one of the things that helps you on and covers up any initial worries you might have, as 'I wonder if I might get injured?' I don't think that, at eighteen, applies to you at all. So you go forward, nothing's gonna happen, let's enjoy life.[512]

Unlike the incident with the German prisoners—which illustrates the innocence of the soldiers on both sides—this is followed by a recollection which demonstrates the antithesis of that innocence, the indiscriminate violence which those soldiers had to face:

> I remember we went into-, when we had to move forward on one occasion, we...[went] through this field, and up against a high hedge on the right-hand side, we were quite close to that hedge, and we had to move forward to the end of the hedge to get into the next field, and there was suddenly this dreadful hissing noise, awful hissing noise, and from the other side of this hedge came out this huge...flame. It was [a] ghastly looking thing, I don't know, it must have been...fifty feet long or more, and with a dreadful hissing noise, this flame stuck on a stone

[511] Gordon, 1, 25.
[512] Gordon, 2, 00-01.

> cottage which was just ahead of us, and it splattered on, stuck and splattered on that cottage. Nobody ever came out, I can only hope that people had got out of that cottage at the rear side sometime before, but as far as we're concerned it was an empty cottage, and that was one of the flamethrowers that I think were used by Churchill tanks, not our particular regiment but another regiment had these flamethrowing tanks, they were absolutely terrifying, this dreadful hissing noise as this huge jet of flame came out forty or fifty feet and splattered on this building. God help anyone who'd been in there. That's one thing I do remember and if anyone was frightened, I certainly was, because I've always been frightened of fire, strangely enough, and...but yes, that I found a very worrying experience, and that was equipment that was being used by our own side.[513]

As well as being a shocking demonstration of violence, this incident also clearly foreshadows Gordon's tank being set alight. He dwells on the imagery of the flames and expresses a hope that those in the cottage made it out, as he made it out of the tank. Arguably, the difference between the first and the second description of arriving in Normandy indicates Gordon building up to describing the key traumatic event. There are other indications of foreshadowing too—in the first session Gordon describes the tense experience of manoeuvring the tank across a road, something which happened just before his tank was hit, and he also mentions seeing dazed crewmen from his regiment making their way to the rear after their tanks had been hit. The key incident is described after another break, which was perhaps necessary for Gordon to compose himself, and indeed there are indications that he may have talked about it off-the-record before the recorder was switched on again:

> We went forward and we came to this road, only a single track road, and we thought 'We've got to get across this', so we dropped down, shot across this road and up onto the hedge the other side and into the field. 'Ah', we could take a breath of fresh air for a moment or two, but in actual fact it was shortly after that...we were hit, something came in from my side of the tank, in from...yeah, my side of the tank, in, and we

[513] Gordon, 2, 01-03.

> just shuddered to a stop, and it was instantly hot...The nearest I can explain that is if you're ever been in a sauna, that is how it felt. I didn't know this for many years later until somebody said 'Try a sauna' and I did and I said to him afterwards, 'You won't believe this but...this puts me right to...back in my tank when it was set on fire'. That was the sort of heat, it was *instant* there, obviously some shell had come in and set the thing going, so...I remember sitting down on my seat, which was just behind where I would normally stand, and thought, 'Ooh, it's hot in here, I think I'd better go home'. And I stood up, and turned round, and put my foot on...the bar of metal there, because I needed to do that to lift myself up so I could push open the flaps of the turret, and-, which I did, and then I literally threw myself out and landed on the track at the rear of the tank with enough...motion in that action of throwing out, landing on the track, and rolling sufficiently to drop on the ground at the side of the Churchill tank, by which time the ammunition started exploding, and unfortunately no-one else got out of that tank. And I had to lay there, hearing those dreadful screams, which...thank god didn't last very long, and then not long afterwards, along, crawling along, came my officer from his tank. He had obviously had to get out of his tank, reasons I don't know, and he came along, he looked down at me, and he said 'Who are you? ', and I was a bit annoyed at that because he'd given me orders about two hours earlier, but of course I didn't realise, my face was completely black...I found out later that most of my hair had been burnt off, and...I had a glove on the right hand, but I'd taken the glove off on the left hand and the left hand, when you held it up, the skin had-, which was absolutely white, hung down in a great strip. It didn't-, it wasn't painful at all. I think possibly that the depth of the burn to the hand had burnt away the nerve endings, this is only my guess, I don't know, so as far as I'm concerned, my left hand was there, fingers in the normal shape, with this strip of hand-, skin hanging down, and I managed to...totter, I suppose, somewhere, not very far, and I came across a chap...[sighs]...and...[sighs and chokes up]...the look of horror on his face when he saw me...[choking up]...when he saw me, is something I've never forgotten...never forgotten. He took me by the arm and he got me to...a first aid something or other, I don't know, anyway, for first aid, and I can only assume they must have injected me and I passed out, because that's all I recall is getting to this first aid, and not even going into it, but getting to it, and then, end of story.[514]

It is noteworthy that Gordon becomes outwardly emotional not while describing the fire, or even listening to his friends dying, but when remembering the reaction of the man who helped him; this is presumably because it was the moment that Gordon

[514] Gordon, 3, 01-06.

realised the extent of his disfigurements and the destruction of his normal appearance. The matter is rendered even more intriguing by the fact that Gordon reports being blinded for several days afterwards.[515] Like Procter, Gordon regains his composure very quickly, and then retrieves a model tank to illustrate the incident further.[516]

In the way his account foreshadows the traumatic event and then goes on to analyse it in such precise detail, Gordon certainly demonstrates 'trauma signals',[517] while the repeated imagery, reminiscent of what have been called 'flashbulb memories',[518] is surely a prime example of the sort of vivid and durable memories which are likely to result from war experiences. By encouraging recollection and analysis the reaction to trauma here is in fact a help, not a hindrance, to the oral historian. Gordon himself has been able to establish an identity as a damaged veteran and discuss his short period of active service with great sincerity. The remainder of Gordon's interview is an interesting description of his burns treatment and rehabilitation, with a moral of making the most of what one has. Evidently Gordon did not attempt to repress his traumatic memories, but instead subjected them to precise and repeated analysis, and although they clearly remained emotionally raw this ultimately did not prevent him from speaking about the war.

Although these two accounts are the only ones which involve emotional reactions when recalling traumatic events, it is also worth considering some less obvious indications of trauma: along with such long silences, overt displays of emotion,

[515] Gordon, 3, 13.
[516] Gordon, 3, 08-11.
[517] BenEzer, 'Trauma Signals', p. 35.
[518] Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 83; Schacter, *Searching for Memory*, pp. 200-210.

changes in voice and body language, and an inability to continue telling the story, BenEzer suggests also that traumatic memories might appear as 'hidden' events which emerge only 'during the probing phase', or, similarly, intrusive images which appear unbidden and disrupt the narrative.[519] The closing part of Bill Partridge's account provides what seems a clear example of this sort of intrusive image:

> I still considered that teaching recruits was probably more important than my shooting Germans, or trying to, or commanding a platoon...later on...[4]and...I suppose too that frankly, I probably had enough but...Normandy was a terrible experience which I don't think...Well we're all made differently aren't we, I have a sensitive nature so...I don't think that really I wanted to go back, start losing all my friends and seeing them shot at, and beaten down, you know, being in a...a dug out and start moaning and shouting. 'Do us all a favour mate and die, please, die', you know, it's awful, yeah...[8]so...[8][520]

Thinking back to Normandy, Partridge seems to suddenly recall the image of a dying comrade. Yet a connection can be observed here with the general tendency for interviewees to become more forthcoming later in the interview, as they think more deeply about their life stories and perhaps become more relaxed. It seems that sometimes interviewees work up to confronting a key traumatic event, gradually including more detail before acknowledging it in its horrific entirety. This parallels a point made by Corinna Peniston-Bird that 'in exploring the ramifications of discomposure, perhaps the most important factor is the duration of the interview…Dominant cultural constructions are most likely to be reiterated, even apparently accepted, at the beginning of the interview.'[521] This appears to apply equally to discomposure arising from war trauma.[522] John Majendie reports shooting

[519] BenEzer, 'Trauma Signals', pp. 34-5.
[520] Partridge, 4, 00-02.
[521] Peniston-Bird, 'Patriotism and the 'People's War'', p. 78.
[522] Thomson, *Anzac Memories*, p. 77.

the British sniper around thirty minutes into the interview, as an example of the realities of war; it is another thirty minutes before he returns to consider the personal repercussions of that event as part of his psychological breakdown. Ray Gordon, as already noted, seems to build up the more negative themes of his story as the interview goes on. Tom Dutton shifts to a more confessional mode in the latter stages of his interview, where he ruminates on comradeship and discusses the death of one admired NCO and the wounding of another. These men had been referred to by rank throughout the interview, but near the end Dutton reveals first their surnames and then their given names.[523] Ted Howson mentions the death of a friend early on, before returning to discuss it in more detail later.[524] Colin Criddle, Syd West and Doug Mayman also open up about dead and wounded comrades later in their interviews, adding detail and names.[525] Yet most of the interviewees appear to become more forthcoming after some time, whether they are talking about trauma or not. It is natural that interviewees should feel a reluctance to share emotionally-charged memories straight away, and instead find their feet by focussing on the basic narrative of their war experience at first; it would be a mistake to attribute this reticence to the psychological impact of trauma when it simply indicates that 'memories must be granted space to unfold'.[526]

One can suggest that in relating their traumatic memories most of the veterans show subtle 'trauma signals'—changes in tone and pace, and nervous laughter are common features—but the fact remains that they *can* and *do* speak. It seems that although

[523] Dutton, 1, 81-87.
[524] Howson, 1, 04, 42-44.
[525] Criddle, 1, 47-50; West, 1, 35-36, 56-58; Mayman, 1, 19-24.
[526] Peniston-Bird, 'Patriotism and the People's War', p. 78.

most experienced traumatic things, this did not necessarily leave them traumatised. They are not forced into silence by their traumatic memories; nor do most break down when they do speak. While the stereotype is that veterans cannot articulate their traumatic experiences, among those who are willing to be interviewed this is simply not the case. It should not be surprising that those who are willing to talk about their war experiences are precisely those who have come to terms with traumatic memories: in fact, several have suggested that 'the most effective way of dealing with traumatic memories is to develop some kind of story or narrative about the event'.[527] Arguably, historians of trauma are often too eager to identify potentially innocuous features of oral narratives as evidence of deeply repressed, inaccessible trauma. Yet as Lindsey Dodd argues, 'there are more or less traumatising events, and more or less traumatised responses…Instead of conceptualising trauma as unrepresentable, it seems more fruitful to understand the ways humans can share experience'.[528]

Motivations for Narrating Traumatic Experiences

Now that it has been established that veterans can and do discuss trauma frankly, it is fruitful to explore the reasons why they choose to do this. Since trauma is 'laden with social meaning',[529] and as subject to composure as any other recollections, then its expression is a subjective process as much to do with culture as with psychology. Lindsey Dodd has illustrated the potential impact of such discourses, pointing out how

[527] Nigel Hunt and Ian Robbins, 'Telling Stories of the War: Ageing Veterans Coping with their Memories Through Narrative', *Oral History*, 26/2 (Autumn, 1998), pp. 62-3; Alison Parr, 'Breaking the Silence: Traumatised War Veterans and Oral History', *Oral History*, 35/1 (Spring, 2007), pp. 64, 68; David W. Jones, 'Distressing Histories and Unhappy Interviewing', *Oral History*, 26/2 (Autumn, 1998), p. 50.
[528] Dodd, 'Childhood "Trauma"', p. 40.
[529] Ibid., p. 38.

the 'elision of trauma and victimhood' causes French victims of Allied bombing to refuse to acknowledge their trauma because they cannot claim the status of victims.[530] In the latter half of the twentieth century, 'People came to be seen—and to see themselves—as passive victims of, not as active participants in violence', an attitude which is extended even to soldiers.[531] Trauma came to be regarded as an inevitable consequence of war service, to the extent that it became intrinsically linked to the identity of veterans. Fighting had, of course, always been a prestigious pursuit, but simply being in combat now became prestigious, as it involved facing both the danger of death or wounding and the seeming likelihood of long-term psychological consequences.[532] If soldiering is thought to invariably result in trauma, the soldier who did not endure trauma seems scarcely capable of being called a veteran. It is such 'victim-veteran constructions'[533] which can be attributed with exacerbating the epidemic of trauma in the aftermath of the Vietnam War—even though only a small proportion of soldiers saw combat,[534] a much higher proportion regarded themselves as having been in combat,[535] and reported cases of PTSD also far exceeded the number of frontline combatants.[536] More recently, it has been suggested that one reason American Iraq War veterans report a PTSD rate four times as high as British veterans of the same conflict is a greater expectation among Americans that their

[530] Ibid., p. 40; Jones and Wessely, *Shell Shock to PTSD*, p. 134; Schacter, *Searching for Memory*, p. 209.
[531] Bessell, 'Violence and Victimhood', in Echternkamp and Martens (eds.), *Experience and Memory*, pp. 230-1.
[532] Harari, 'Martial Illusions', pp. 45-7.
[533] Lembcke, 'War Trauma', p. 49.
[534] Jones and Wessely, 'Psychiatry and the "Lessons of Vietnam"', p. 91.
[535] Holmes, *Acts of War*, p. 76.
[536] Jones and Wessely, *Shell Shock to PTSD*, pp. 134, 185; Sally Satel, 'Returning from Iraq, Still Fighting Vietnam', *New York Times*, 5th March 2004, <nytimes.com/2004/03/05/opinion/returning-from-iraq-still-fighting-vietnam.html> [accessed November, 2017].

troops will return home traumatised.[537] In relation to the process of achieving composure, avoiding traumatic stories may have a deleterious effect on veterans' identities, while discussing trauma strengthens them. In a more positive sense, it is also likely that modern discourses provide frameworks for veterans to discuss trauma in a way which was not possible previously, for example when Hugh McManners was writing in the early 1990s. Moreover, simply the passage of time may have given some of the interviewees time to come to terms with their memories.

Another possible motivation to discuss trauma is the aforementioned desire to tell put the whole story on the record, including aspects which might have been self-censored earlier in life or in more casual situations for fear of causing upset or offence, particularly to family. A reluctance to discuss the war has often been identified as one of the key psychological consequences of war experience, and this is undoubtedly true in many cases. Hunt and Robbins point out that relationships with family may be detached from trauma; speaking to them may threaten that security, which makes it safer to tell disturbing stories to outsiders.[538] Yet it is possible to explain this behaviour in a way unrelated to trauma, because also important is the expected reaction of the veteran's audience. A veteran may be more willing to talk to other veterans or historians rather than wives or children for the simple reason that they wish to avoid causing the latter pain or upset. This does not necessarily have anything to do with protecting oneself from trauma, as a veteran who has been able to completely come

[537] Lembcke, 'War Trauma', p. 49.
[538] Nigel Hunt and Ian Robbins, 'World War II Veterans, Social Support, and Veterans' Associations', *Aging and Mental Health*, 5/2 (2001), p. 180. This is a useful overview of veterans' social support networks, but, as it focusses on those with lasting mental injury, cannot be extrapolated to all veterans.

to terms with his traumatic memories may still self-censor in this way. Speaking to a stranger in the more formal environment of an interview appears to encourage more frankness. This is why Jack Eglington explains that he is happy to describe people being killed in gory detail in the interview, 'between you and me', but when it comes to writing to the son of one of those men, 'I can't tell him that really, I'll have to describe it sort of a bit different'.[539]

For veterans, discourses of trauma provide a motivation for focussing accounts on combat and moments of danger, intensifying the natural desire to tell an exciting story. As noted in the previous chapter, non-combatants find the lack of danger in their war narratives to be problematic, and find ways either to justify their relatively safe role, acknowledge that their position was a privileged one compared with others, or stress their proximity to danger. This last tactic, however, is a common one even among men who saw significant combat. Indeed, 'near misses' are one of the most common narrative devices seen in veterans' testimony, distinctive of the wider genre of military memoirs, as well as being a cliché in popular representations like war films.[540] Parallels can be drawn here with the ongoing 'spatial turn' in oral history, which acknowledges the ways in which narrators distort space, as well as time, in order to stress the meanings of their stories. For instance, Mark Roseman and Tim Cole have both explored the ways in which Holocaust survivors utilise time and space to 'assert control over their narratives', create distance from traumatic ordeals, and emphasise their inability to influence events.[541] In veterans' testimony, however, the

[539] Eglington, 1, 02.
[540] Thomson, *Anzac Memories*, pp. 39, 77.
[541] Roseman, 'Surviving Memory', in Perks and Thomson (eds.), *Oral History Reader*, pp. 238, 241; Cole, '(Re)Placing the Past: Spatial Strategies of Retelling Difficult Stories', pp. 30-49.

tendency is the opposite: distances and timeframes are compressed to emphasise that death or wounding was an immanent possibility, which consequently supports the identity of the combat veteran. This is not to dispute that such stories are basically truthful, merely to suggest that the details can be misremembered and subconsciously distorted to accord more closely with popular clichés and discourses around veterancy. Veterans make the most of the opportunity presented by events which encapsulate the way they wish to interpret and communicate their war experiences.

Jack Eglington is quite vocal about his desire to emphasise 'near misses', which are almost the first thing he mentions.[542] During his most memorable experience, when his carrier was hit and the two passengers killed:

> the shot came from Evrecy, that...direction of Evrecy, down on the right hand side, came through, it must have missed me, it must have missed me by a fraction, it must have been a fraction, it missed me, it went right the way through, and that's when it killed Ron Groves and the officer I was driving.[543]

Also discussing Hill 112, Stan Procter utilises three separate 'near misses'. At the beginning of his account of the battle comes a recollection of being caught in a bombardment—' that's when I nearly met me lot'.[544] This is followed by several minutes describing his relatively mundane work as a signaller, where Procter quickly runs out of things to say and resorts to other experiences to keep the story interesting, stressing firstly that he had some exciting experiences of his own, and secondly that his day-to-day role was also dangerous:

[542] Eglington, 1, 02-04.
[543] Eglington, 1, 10-11.
[544] Procter, 1, 07.

ML: So what could you actually see of the fighting at 112? Obviously you were busy but...

SP: Yeah, busy, yeah, but I mean I particularly remember looking out and seeing them walking up that wheatfield towards the hill, towards the hill and...Of course mostly I was in-, stuck in my scout car, or in the ditch, and I was too busy. I noticed [what was] going on around me but I couldn't-, didn't see it all, you see. And I, of course I...the daftest thing I did, well, the...dispatch rider, friend of mine who was unfortunately killed a bit later on, my wireless set packed up, and so he...I asked him for a new one to come, but he said-, they told me it'd be delivered but they didn't deliver it to me...he must have dropped it-, he didn't like where he was, he dropped it halfway up the road to Hill 112 you see. And there I was walking around, I don't know whether it was dusk, it was...not daylight, but I don't know whether it was dusk or morning now, must have been dusk, and an infantryman looked up from his foxhole, he said 'I should get down if I were you mate', and of course at that moment these tracers came towards me, and the only reason I think that saved me was that they couldn't traject it down low enough...so that's one of my closest...experiences, yeah. Am I doing the right thing?

ML: And what-...Absolutely, that's just what we're after Stan. So what happened then? You were at Hill 112. Were you at the chateau the whole time?

SP: No, no, we were there for about three or four days, then we moved back down the hill and we were still on the hill but on the lower slopes, yeah.

ML: And what sort of things would you be doing then?

SP: All the same thing, just sitting at the wireless set and keeping everybody in touch with each other, that's really all the time. You could hear what was going on around and, and of course, my truck was hit once or twice, but...Fat lot of good the armour plating was, there was a piece of shrapnel went straight through the side, 'course it was the White scout car, you know the White? Your head was above-, your head was above the armour plating, just a canvas roof. And of course the canvas roof got riddled to bits and so that when it was raining the rain came in [laughs].[545]

[545] Procter, 1, 10-12.

Eric Tipping, meanwhile, recalls an incident when his battalion carried out a 'mad minute'—firing all weapons in an effort to shock the enemy:

> And the time came, mad minute, we all fired, bang bang, and...it was [a] crescendo, you know, I bet Jerry wondered what the hell was going on. But anyway, we knew, we knew that we was gonna suffer for it 'cos soon as we'd done the mad minute. So I was due to come out of my trench and this other chap come in. And...he was, strange enough he was, it was a German Jew, this chap was, he'd got away from Germany, probably before the war, into-, out of Germany into England and joined up...Anyway he took over from me and I, I started-, but by then Jerry had started shelling, and I hadn't moved out of me trench, just along, and...a whasname bomb landed straight in the trench and killed this chap. I mean, two minutes and I'd have been in there in, and he'd have been coming out.[546]

In recalling a patrol in the Reichswald Geoff Young demonstrates a less common form of 'near miss', in which the culprit is not an impersonal shell or spray of bullets, but a group of enemy soldiers:

> So when we got there, they got out the jeep and they were gonna to do their patrol. I had to camouflage up. Directly they got into the German lines a dog barked, upset the apple cart. At the same time the Germans had sent a fighting patrol out, about thirty men, and they were coming towards me, this water tank, and they came on the one side, I never opened fire, I let them go. And as they came up, I came round the back, because our four chaps were coming back to get on the jeep, so we-they got on the jeep and I took them back to our company then. So that was a near miss.[547]

In this description it is possible that Young may have exaggerated the number of enemy as well as their proximity to his hiding place. It is also interesting that he airs the possibility of opening fire; it is difficult to imagine that Young seriously considered initiating a firefight with thirty enemy soldiers, but apparently the discourses around

[546] Tipping, 1, 59-60; see also 1, 98.
[547] Young, 1, 58.

veterancy demand that the possibility of a fight against the odds be at least mentioned. He also recalls, more conventionally, a direct hit on the battalion headquarters 'where I'd just had a cup of tea an hour before'.[548]

Barry Freeman's emphasising of danger as a corrective to his relatively mundane driving job has already been discussed, but one extract provides a very clear example of a 'near miss' story. Freeman had been ordered to move his truck off the road due to a blockage ahead:

> But as I pulled into the lane there was a-, I could see the chaps just down this track and one of them came up and he said, he said, 'Leave the vehicle there', he said, 'and come down and have a...have something to eat', which I did, but I'd only got as far, oh ten or fifteen yards from the vehicle, and something came over, I never heard it, but it must have landed right on the top of the vehicle, because...I never heard a sound, but it blew me onto my face, I lost me glasses, and these-, one of these chaps came over and lifted me up and said 'Are you alright?', and do you know, I had not got a scratch on me, not a scratch. But he said, 'You've lost your vehicle', and I turned round to look, and the vehicle was an absolute wreck, absolute wreck, so what I was carrying in the vehicle I don't know, but they reckon it was ammunition, but...I felt pretty awful and dizzy after being blown off my feet, but...the lads who came up to see if I was alright, 'You're bloody lucky you are!', and...that was it more or less, for that little episode.[549]

Furthermore, Tom Dutton's description of the shelling which triggered his breakdown can also be considered a 'near miss'.[550] Tellingly, none of these interviewees reported being wounded—a far more obvious indication of the dangers associated with soldiering which renders temporal and spatial distortions unnecessary. Yet these

[548] Young, 1, 86-87.
[549] Freeman, 1, 34-6.
[550] Dutton, 1, 56-57.

examples demonstrate that the narrative technique of the 'near miss' is an extremely common one.

A similar narrative technique dependent on discourses around veterancy is comparing attitudes before and after commitment to battle for the first time. A naïve enthusiasm is contrasted with a cynical and fatalistic attitude after the dangers of combat become apparent. While many soldiers undoubtedly did react in this way, it is also true that most people 'know' from popular representations that soldiers start as callow youths and become jaded, and veterans likewise understand that it is an aspect of war experience that will be recognised by their audience; the cultural circuit is again at work here.[551] Again, this is not a matter of making things up, but of emphasising certain aspects, or framing experiences in a certain way, to accord to the audience's expectations due to discourses around veterancy.

Limitations of Narrating Trauma

Composure can, of course, also have the effect of sanitising testimony. While it is clear that many veterans do speak very frankly about traumatic incidents and are encouraged to do this by discourses around veterancy, this is not to suggest that they always tell the whole story. A particular subject which is especially sanitised is the infliction of violence by the interviewee, not only because this breaches obvious social taboos, but because victimhood and killing are incompatible. Descriptions of killing will be discussed in the next chapter, but here it is sufficient to note that the act of killing

[551] Harari, 'Martial Illusions', pp 45-7. Uses of this trope by Ken Tout, Ray Gordon and Hugh Beach have already been noted; see Tout, 1, 9-10; Gordon, 1, 23; 2, 00-01; Beach, 1, 04-05, 15-18, 27-29.

is evidently still heavily stigmatised in a way which being frightened no longer is, so discussions of killing are rare, brief, and hesitant.

Some interviewees are clearly more willing to discuss death and violence than others. It is evident that on many occasions an interviewee could have gone further in his description but chose not to. In many cases, abstract language is used to avoid fully confronting trauma: friends 'disappear' rather than being blown to bits, or are 'caught' by machine-guns rather than shot.[552] With significant understatement, Hugh Beach remarks of one man fatally wounded by shrapnel that 'he was obviously extremely ill'[553]; one can only imagine what this meant in reality. Reports of dead bodies are significantly more common than descriptions of those men actually being killed, or of the presumably more numerous, and potentially more disturbing, wounded. The obvious explanation for this is that it is often easier not to talk about disturbing things. The stereotype of the traumatised veteran who remained silent until becoming involved with a veterans' organisation in later life is in some instances absolutely accurate, as in the case of Michael Watts:

> ML: How do you, or how did you cope, or still...when you think about casualties, either at the time or after the war?
>
> MW: I think this is why you- we didn't talk about it. You see all these horrible things, people's heads and their arms...This is why you don't want to talk about it.
>
> ML: So you never talked about it at the time? And that's still bits that you don't want to...
>
> MW: No I didn't. It was fifty years before I started to talk about it at all.

[552] Tout, 2, 53-54; West, 1, 16-17.
[553] Beach, 1, 27.

> ML: And how did you start talking about it?
>
> MW: Normandy Veterans, that was it, I couldn't think of the name, that's when I first saw something about Normandy Veterans and thought 'Oh I'll join that', and when I was in that I then heard about 'Oh, the glider pilots, they had one as well', so I went to Blackpool the next year, and met up with the glider pilots, and after that I always went to the glider pilot dos.[554]

Bill Edwardes' story is remarkably similar:

> I got home, got demobbed, got some work, and the last thing I wanted to do was talk about the war, and what happened...certainly wanted to put it behind me, got married, had a family, developed a career, and didn't do anything until the fiftieth anniversary, when we went to- down to Southsea, to where the D-Day Museum is, and there was a big do going on down there, and they had a computer, where you could put your details in and get connected to people, and...The reason why I didn't want to be involved is that I thought that if I talked about it I would bore people to bits, because they wouldn't wanna know, and they wouldn't know what you were talking about anyway, but Jean said to me, 'You should put your name on that register and see what happens'. […]And then I heard very quickly from the Wessex branch of the Normandy Veterans' Association, inviting me to come along to meetings, which I did, and...then I discovered that I could talk to other people who knew what I was talking about, and weren't bored with your stories, and knew things that you knew, you had things in common, and I found great...great comfort in that.[555]

Hunt and Robbins have argued that other veterans can provide an important audience for traumatic stories, or 'can serve as a means of socially developing narratives about the war' which provide an alternative to discussing traumatic stories. However, shared narratives can be problematic if others had different experiences or recall events differently.[556] The tendency for veterans' organisations to enforce a uniform interpretation of events is illustrated by Alan Hitchcock's account:

[554] Watts, 1, 24-25.
[555] Edwardes, 1, 49-52.
[556] Hunt and Robbins, 'World War II Veterans, Social Support, and Veterans' Associations', p. 178.

> ...now, when I go up to reunions and that, I'm very proud to be, [have] been in the Worcestershire Regiment, I always will be proud. I feel that though it's a country regiment, was a country regiment, it is something to be proud *of*, very much so. They uphold the name and I uphold the name as well, though I'm a Surrey man, [inaudible 7]...I've never known any of them to turn their backs or anything like that, you know. When they got over the other-, tell you, when they got over the other side of the Seine, they had to go up through a road, and...they got to, in a bend in the road there...There's a monument there. This German tank came along, because they put up machine-guns on one side and machine-guns there, and...the Germans came along, and they thought they had us, you know, but...they stood their ground, they really stood their ground up there, and got-, sent them back...[557]

This section of the interview directly follows Hitchcock's recollections of being wounded and evacuated during the fighting on Mont Pinçon: he was never present at the crossing of the Seine, but the day is remembered, in Bill Edwardes' words, as 'a great battle for the First Worcesters',[558] mentioned by all of the other former members of the battalion who were interviewed, and Hitchcock seems to have picked up the shared story at post-war reunions and felt able to share in the prestige attached to it.

If some memories are easier not to narrate than others, other possible explanations for sanitisation should also be considered. Once again, the individual's control over their own narrative must be remembered, and at times death and violence are simply not relevant to the point the interviewee wishes to communicate. Edwin Hunt's account of landing on Gold Beach is sanitised in the sense that he mentions casualties were incurred but does not describe them, but this simply seems to reflect the fact he is more interested in describing the way 'Rhino' ferries were used in the landing.[559] Similarly, Ian Hammerton mentions the casualties on Juno Beach, but generally

[557] Hitchcock, 1, 24-25.
[558] Edwardes, 1, 71.
[559] Hunt, 1, 113-117.

contents himself with describing what he and his crew did to breach the defences, aside from remarking 'as I walked along I passed an injured Canadian soldier whose...face was...very badly damaged, being comforted by the padre'.[560] These matter-of-fact narratives could be interpreted as strategies to avoid acknowledging traumatic memories; however, this risks invoking trauma where it is simply not a relevant factor, and as both Hunt and Hammerton discuss disturbing sights elsewhere, such an interpretation does not seem justified.

Understanding Trauma in Veterans' Testimony

Paradoxically, the strong consensus in Western culture on the interaction between war and trauma has, if anything, only hindered efforts to understand the relationship objectively due to the cultural and moral sensitivities involved. This analysis indicates, however, that when dealing with Second World War veterans one can suggest a more plausible understanding of trauma than applying the ahistorical model of PTSD. During the war, battle exhaustion was poorly understood, although 'suggestions that psychiatric breakdown was due to a failure of personal morality or social degeneration had largely been abandoned in public at least'.[561] The Battle of Normandy began with most psychiatric cases evacuated, but due to alarming wastage rates 'forward psychiatry'—first developed during the First World War and based on the principles of proximity (to the front line), immediacy (after the appearance of problems) and expectancy (of return to active service)—had been reintroduced by the end of June

[560] Hammerton, 1, 52-58.
[561] Jones and Wessely, *Shell Shock to PTSD*, p. 119.

and rates of return to units increased from ten to sixty-five per cent.[562] Battle exhaustion cases were usually treated with rest:

> On arrival at the Field Dressing Station, the exhausted man would be told to wash himself, be put into pyjamas, sedated with a light dose of barbiturate and left to sleep on a stretcher for a day or two. After waking up he was transferred to another tent and given a day to recover from sedation and to sort himself out. Finally, he went to a third tent where he became 'a soldier once more'.[563]

Recovered soldiers returned to their units within five to six days.[564]

After the war, there was little in the way of psychiatric support and former soldiers were advised to forget about what they had seen and move on: 'society in the 1940s did not place great emphasis on the problems of the returning ex-serviceman: there wasn't time, money or energy to spare'.[565] The idea of receiving counselling was stigmatised in a way which today is difficult to imagine, but, Ben Shephard suggests, 'In many ways, it was precisely the old buttoned-up British tradition of suppressing emotion which got people through the wartime experience; switching off the anger and hatred could not be done quickly'. Overall, he argues, British military psychiatry was fairly successful.[566] Robert Dale has argued that Soviet veterans proved remarkably successful at coping with wartime trauma due to the validation provided by national myths of collective sacrifice and national rebirth; it is likely that British veterans benefitted in a similar way from their own national myths.[567]

[562] Shephard, *War of Nerves*, pp. 250-1, 255.
[563] Ibid., p. 255.
[564] Ibid., p. 255.
[565] Ibid., p. 327.
[566] Ibid., pp. 323, 325, 328.
[567] Robert Dale, '"No Longer Normal": Traumatised Red Army Veterans in Post-War Leningrad', in Leese and Crouthamel (eds.), *Traumatic Memories*, p. 136.

The Vietnam War and the recognition of PTSD led to a reassessment of trauma throughout the Anglophone world, encouraging veterans to reassess their traumatic wartime experiences in light of the new developments. This created a potentially problematic association between trauma and veterancy in the public perception, and risked 'taking the responsibility for the problems away from the victims, medicalising and pathologizing them',[568] but also provided new frameworks through which trauma could be expressed. Veterans find it possible—indeed, advantageous—to discuss trauma, and make use of strategies like describing 'near-misses' to emphasise their proximity to danger.

This study cannot indicate what proportion of veterans overcame their wartime traumas, and what proportion never came to terms with the things they witnessed. Nor is it possible to determine whether trauma increased or decreased the likelihood of speaking—is it the heavily traumatised who remain for the most part silent, or was it the unaffected who left the war behind and the traumatised, unable to forget, who have in old age found it therapeutic to speak publicly about their experiences? Alistair Thomson believed that in the context of his investigation into war memory, non-speakers 'are significant by their absence'.[569] In oral history terms, however, the important point is that a substantial number *could* achieve composure, and were eventually willing and able to speak about disturbing experiences. This is reassuring for the oral historian of war and acts as a corrective to stereotypes of veterans as silent, brooding, and jaded individuals never willing to discuss their disturbing pasts.

[568] Hunt and Robbins, 'Telling Stories of the War', p. 58.
[569] Thomson, *Anzac Memories*, p. 231.

The historical usefulness of such potentially traumatic memories will be considered further in the next two chapters.

Chapter 6
Combat Experience and Morale

The previous chapters have laid out the various considerations in the way veterans' oral testimony can be analysed. This and the subsequent chapter focus on the end goal of such analysis, the application of oral testimony to military history, and also deal with the question of usefulness. The first chapter outlined how reliability and validity can be used to measure a source's probable veracity. However, it is a separate issue whether this evidence can be historically useful. The real problem with oral history is not its veracity per se, but how the peculiar type of personal, subjective, often emotional information provided by oral history can contribute to wider, generalised interpretations of those issues which are of interest to historians. Usefulness is not as simple as merely corroborating that an event occurred, or an attitude existed—the fact in question must also be relevant to the issues the historian wishes to illuminate: in this case those surrounding the British Army in Northwest Europe in 1944-5. This chapter will assess the contribution oral testimony can make to understandings of combat experience and morale, while the next chapter will tackle doctrine and conduct in battle. Both aim to employ the testimony according to more conventional historical objectives, accounting for subjectivity in order to assess what it reveals about past events—thus marrying together oral history and military history.

That said, while there is a place here for factual and chronological information, military historians are usually less dependent on oral history for such basic information than, say, historians attempting to piece together Holocaust survivors' journeys or trade unionists' activities, since military bureaucracy generally produces a great volume of

records. Extracts of testimony particularly useful here are recollections of less well-defined experiences and attitudes, whose usefulness is usually not intrinsically related to specific incidents, but rather to what things generally were 'like'. All the interviews contain at least some of this nuanced, reflective evidence, which through careful analysis can be identified, compared and contrasted.

One danger in using personal sources in this way is to become entranced by eyewitness impressions to the extent that their internal assumptions are absorbed and repeated;[570] in particular, to assume that wartime events were as disorganised in reality as they seemed to participants. On the contrary, it is the job of historians to derive useful generalisations out of events which were far too complex for any one individual to understand at the time, and present interpretations of the past which adequately encapsulate what occurred while necessarily being simple enough for readers to understand. It is possible to observe order and coherence in warfare, even if eyewitnesses could not perceive this. To acknowledge that events were perceived incompletely and/or imperfectly does not demand constraining historical study according to the same limitations.

Often, then, the concern here is not with obvious fact but with the *perception* of what took place; yet since all experience relies on culturally mediated perception,[571] subjective perceptions of experience, even if incorrect, are as much facts of history as

[570] John Murphy believed that 'Having been both privileged to rummage through someone's personal memory, and complicit in articulating what was found there, the oral historian's critical faculties are partially paralysed'; Murphy, 'The Voice of Memory', p. 171. While it would be unfair to suggest that oral historians' impartiality is invariably undermined, there is certainly a recognisable tendency in the oral history of war to privilege lamentations of the 'pity of war' over meticulous and objective analysis of the historical reality. See, for example, Field, '"Shooting at Shadows"', pp. 75-86.
[571] Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives*, p. 12; Bourke, *Fear*, pp. 75-6.

anything else, as Alessandro Portelli has influentially argued.[572] In drawing attention to such processes, it is necessary to draw a distinction between the cultural context within which people have experiences, and the discursive context in which they *relate* those experiences. Oral historians are for the most part loath to suggest that past experience and present subjectivity can ever truly be separated, and some decline to draw any distinction.[573] However, to employ a *reduction ad absurdum*, it is undeniable that at least some of what people recollect reflects past experience: if this were not so, there would be no correlation between physical events and the memories thereof, and memory would be worthless as a cognitive function. If all experience is perception, that does not mean all perception is incorrect. It follows that people can relate information about the past just as a letter or document, although biased, can contain evidence of historical value.

It is therefore possible, albeit difficult, to distinguish between subjectivity at the time of the event, which influenced the way experiences were perceived, and in the present, which influences the way experiences are remembered and related; these are referred to here as 'historical subjectivity' and 'retrospective subjectivity'. It is the latter which has largely been the subject of the thesis so far, and the former which is the focus here.

The experience of battle is the most obvious candidate for assessment through this sort of oral history research, being as it is one of the most mysterious aspects of military history, characterised by human factors poorly recorded in the documentary

[572] Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, p. 50.
[573] See, for instance, Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives*, p. 12.

sources. There is no suggestion that the testimony provides an unadulterated record of past experience or tells us the whole story about what combat was like; however, it can add valuable pieces to the puzzle, especially where practical factors interact with human behaviour. Peter Simkins suggests that oral history can help illuminate 'the tactical and sociological factors affecting the conduct of units in battle'.[574] Combat itself is a contested term—the closer a soldier is to the enemy, the narrower his definition of combatant tends to be[575]—but it invariably presumes exposure to physical danger due to enemy action; this is the definition used here, although it may encompass events a substantial distance away from the front line. It is hardly necessary to demonstrate that battle was horrific, unpleasant and terrifying. Fear is certainly the most important 'emotion-label'[576] in the testimony, and, presumably due to the modern-day openness about war trauma, few had any qualms admitting they were frightened[577] (although some stress that if they felt scared this did not equate to *acting* scared).[578] Nevertheless, it is more productive to focus on what the testimony indicates about combat experience aside from the obvious.

Agency in Accounts of Combat

Popular representations of combat tend to visualise soldiers as victims enduring a threat which is arbitrary and indiscriminate. Paddy Griffith's assessment of the

[574] Simkins, 'Everyman at War', in Bond (ed.), *The First World War and British Military History*, p. 312. See also de Lee, 'Oral History', in Addison and Calder (eds.), *Time to Kill*, p. 363.
[575] Allport, *Browned Off*,, p. 212; Holmes, *Acts of War*, pp. 76-7.
[576] Bourke, *Fear*, pp. 73-6, 287-8.
[577] Criddle, 1, 13; Edwardes, 1, 45; Tout, 2, 22-23.
[578] Young, 1, 08.

conditions which seemingly pertained during the American Civil War provides a useful illustration of this:

> We thus have a numbed, sightless and vulnerable regiment in the open confronting an unidentified and invulnerable murder machine. This is scarcely a 'sporting' way to fight a battle—if 'fighting' is the appropriate word to use at all in the context—since the attacker is deprived of much of his free will by the hostile environment into which he is plunged. His chances of defeating the enemy appear remote, and he takes on the quality more of a victim than of a warrior. He becomes a pawn to be sacrificed in a game which he does not understand and which we suspect his commanding officer does not understand either.[579]

In Anthony King's words, war becomes not only unbearably horrific, but a situation in which human relationships dissolve, 'a force majeure beyond human agency'.[580] This image defines both the experiences of soldiers in much of modern warfare and popular assumptions about those experiences. It is not necessary here to draw an absolute distinction between discourse and fact, since the cultural circuit causes real experiences to be incorporated into and re-presented by popular cultural products, which in turn prime veterans to comprehend experiences in particular ways and subsequently to narrate them in particular ways.

Therefore—perhaps contradicting the idea that oral history allows respondents to place on the record what they personally did—the primary impression gained from the interviewees' accounts of combat is that they were almost entirely passive and without agency. At times interviewees can present *others* as showing agency, but usually relegate their own role to that of a passive onlooker; few accounts give much impression of being able to influence the situation, and instead respondents present

[579] Paddy Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the American Civil War* (Marlborough, 1989), p. 17.
[580] Anthony King, *The Combat Soldier: Infantry Tactics and Cohesion in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries* (Oxford, 2013), pp. 1, 7, 12.

themselves as impotent victims of whatever is thrown at them, even in cases where this was evidently not the case. Two accounts from former members of 4/Somerset Light Infantry, as well as Sydney Jary's book, make quite clear that Mike Hutchinson was a talented and dynamic infantry commander;[581] his own interview testimony, however, provides no clue of this. Fred H. Allison, who analysed interviews with Vietnam veteran Mike Nation, remarks that the veteran 'equates combat with an act of nature'[582]; in the same way the interviewees picture the enemy, unless they were within sight, as a largely inhuman entity, a natural force, or even, like Luis Dimarco, comparable to the weather: 'I mean, the bloody mortaring, just like it's starting to rain again, you know…'[583] Although the interviewees are quite capable of acknowledging that theoretically speaking the enemy soldiers endured similar travails to themselves, it is also the case that during combat accounts the enemy are usually characterised as possessing a collective will—as Eric Tipping recalls of life in the front line, 'any noise made and Jerry would open up on you'[584]—apparently with the sole objective of victimising the British soldier.

This level of abstraction is only natural given that, in the conditions of the 'empty battlefield' the enemy were seen so seldom—usually there was no perceptible target against which to act.[585] As Colin Criddle remembers of Hill 112, 'amongst all these casualties that everyone, we were suffering, I never actually saw a German fire...firing machine guns and that, so...they were so...the forward positions were so

[581] Criddle, 1, 56-58; Partridge, 1, 68-70; Jary, *18 Platoon*, pp. 109-10, 131.
[582] Allison, 'Remembering a Vietnam War Firefight', p. 81.
[583] Dimarco, 3, 127.
[584] Tipping, 1, 57.
[585] Ellis, *The Sharp End*, p. 111; French, *Churchill's Army*, pp. 151-2.

concealed.'[586] Furthermore, it is scarcely conceivable that an individual could comprehend the complexity of battles and operations involving thousands; rather, 'for the individual, war is a very parochial, localized experience, almost impossible to relate to a battle or campaign as a whole',[587] which makes any individual contribution difficult to perceive. John Majendie describes how, 'Nobody really...knew an awful lot exactly what was going on...probably say your...horizon is the rim of your steel helmet, and anything above that or to either side, you don't know what's going on, you're not terribly interested'.[588] Bill Partridge remarks that 'you are very very limited as to what, what is, knowing what is going on. You followed your tank and then when it stopped you went down in the corn and when it moved on you got up and on again.'[589] Similarly, Bill Edwardes recalls conversations with his wife in which:

> Jean would often say to me, 'Well what was it like generally?', and I'd say, 'Well apart from my vision forward, I dunno'. I could see-, and that's how you concentrated, you didn't know what was happening in the next field, unless some infantry sergeant or corporal came rushing across and, 'Get the hell out of here, come back' or 'Go forward' or whatever, just did as you were told, concentrated on what you had to do…[590]

It is therefore unsurprising that 'the listener gets an impression of fragmented perceptions', in which individual agency is downplayed.[591]

The way in which the individual soldier is cast as the victim of overwhelmingly large, impersonal and perilous events results in a greater emphasis on hostile than friendly actions. As Stan Procter remarks of Hill 112, 'The fact is that what I remember most

[586] Criddle, 1, 13-14.
[587] McManners, *Scars of War*, p. 8.
[588] Majendie, 1, 14-15.
[589] Partridge, 1, 18-19.
[590] Edwardes, 1, 21-22. See also Ford, 3, 06.
[591] de Lee, 'Oral History', in Addison and Calder, *Time to Kill*, p. 365; Ellis, *The Sharp End*, pp. 108-11.

about is the nebelwaffes [sic], because at- apparently that was the most intensive nebelwaffe [sic] campaign of the whole war.'[592] Shelling had a substantial moral effect on its recipients, which is reflected in the way much of the testimony emphasises its ubiquity. Tipping provides a typical description:

> I found the shelling, sometimes it could be quite...quite disturbing, and especially continuous shelling, it...sort of breaks you up, you know, and sometimes you found it a job to keep yourself as yourself, you know, you could easily crack up […] the Germans were really shelling, they were...I mean they were top notch at it, and...I mean there's no doubt our artillery were brilliant, but I mean, they...sometimes they had a job to beat the Germans and sometimes when we used to take these positions and see these Germans, like white and shaking from our shells, you know, you can understand the repercussion of heavy shelling.[593]

In contrast, little mention is made of the British artillery, which in reality was far more ubiquitous and, in most cases, highly effective:[594] the extract above uses it merely to demonstrate the psychological effects of *enemy* shelling. Unlike their wartime counterparts, who were greatly appreciative of the Allied firepower advantage,[595] the interviewees speaking today report an ambivalent attitude to fire support, which they valued but nonetheless recognised as often posing as great a danger as enemy fire.[596] Since accounts are largely self-centred, focussing on the trials of the individual soldier, they deliver an impression that danger could come from any quarter and there was 'no such thing as friendly fire'.[597]

[592] Procter, 1, 06.
[593] Tipping, 1, 127-129.
[594] Buckley, *Monty's Men*, p. 118; A Borthwick, *Battalion* (Stirling, 1946), quoted in Stephen Bull, *Second World War Infantry Tactics: The European Theatre* (Barnsley, 2012), p. 196.
[595] Allport, *Browned Off*, pp 233-4.
[596] Tipping, 1, 133-134; Partridge, 1, 53-54. Hereward Wake cites the RAF as one of the most terrifying aspects of battle: Wake, 1, 08.
[597] Procter, 1, 28; Majendie, 1, 35-38; Purver, 1, 12-13.

The key subjective aspect of the testimony on combat experience is therefore the way the interviewees cast themselves as victims of events with little agency, with the enemy visualised as an invisible, inhuman and homogeneous force. However, exceptions to this rule are certain cases where interviewees describe being wounded. Victims of artillery and mortars have little choice but to ascribe their woundings to random chance, but being felled in this way seems narratively unsatisfying, perhaps demonstrated by Alan Hitchcock's disjointed and evasive account of his wounding, in which it is initially unclear what injured him, and in which he simply falls back on citing the best-known German artillery systems:

> ML: So what wounded you, was it small arms fire or mortar fire?
>
> AH: I think it was...an eighty-eight actually...It could have been one of these...what do they call them, Moaning Minnie things, you know, and...That's what happened, it just-, don't know, it was all of a sudden, bang, crash and...
>
> ML: And where were you hit?
>
> AH: In the legs and thigh...under the chin a bit.[598]

Being wounded is framed differently where the circumstances permit veterans to humanise the enemy and exert agency by casting themselves as sporting losers in a contest against a skilful and cunning adversary. Robert Purver, for example, describes a combat in Tripsrath in November 1944:

> RP: …there was troops of another platoon, were trying to get into the end of this house, and each time, I saw 'em, coming out from behind the houses, trying to get into this house, and each time they came out a Spandau opened up on 'em, that's a machine gun, and...they couldn't get in, so I took the Bren to the further-most window and, I was looking at an angle at the end of this house, and I was firing my Bren gun at the

[598] Hitchcock, 1, 20-21.

> windows and the doors of this house, and I called across to them, [Lieutenant] Tarrant, called across to 'em, 'I'll give you covering fire! When I stop, go!', so when I stopped firing they tried again to get in, but the firing was so terrific, so heavily defended, so I went back to the other room in this house that I was in, facing the chateau, making the narrowest possible target of myself, looking out of the window. I was looking up there trying to see if there was any movement, and it was at that time, *pow*, I got shot. It must have been a marvellous shot, absolutely marvellous, 'cos there must have only been about two or three inches of actual window that I was looking out at an angle, and I'd got me arm on the upright of the left-hand side of the window like that, and I'd got me Sten gun in my hand, and that was there...it hit the actual corner of the wall and took a load out of me arm, so it shattered me arm, look.
>
> ML: That's what that's from, yep.
>
> RP: Yeah. It went in here and the bullet finished up in that hole there, up in there. So it was a marvellous shot, whoever it was who did it, he was an expert, I thought in one minute I thought 'Thanks very much' and on the other word 'Ooh, bloody hell!' [laughs].[599]

Rather than attributing his wounding to random chance, Purver regards it to have been 'a marvellous shot', almost flattering to have been on the receiving end of. For Hugh Beach, this same narrative strategy suits quite neatly his self-image as an exuberant but sorely amateurish young officer who, during a mission to reconnoitre a bridge, sets himself up as the quarry of the more capable Germans:

> …I had the wit not to just doddle straight up to the bridge, but went off to one side, perhaps a couple of hundred yards with my driver and staff sergeant, we parked the car behind a hut and I walked forward and looked as best I could through field glasses and it looked okay, but of course we were quite a long way away, and then, this is the bad part, I saw a couple of people or three on the other bank of the canal, pottering about, who looked as though they were German soldiers, so I thought 'Here's my moment of glory, I'm engaged with the enemy', dear lord, honestly. Well you see, I had a-, do you know what I mean by a Sten gun? Hopeless, it jammed after about a couple of rounds, so all it did was alert them, and seeing this-, the contest had grown rather unequal, I lay down instead, and I should have explained that there was a railway

[599] Purver, 2, 08-12.

> line running parallel to the canal on a low embankment, so I crawled along on my hands and knees behind the railway line, intending to get back to my vehicle, and they put a very clever shot just skimming the rails which also skimmed my spine, which was not a good moment. So there I was, paralysed from the legs down, lying in the turnips, and my recce staff sergeant, [the] chap I told you about earlier, came and pulled me, probably at considerable risk to himself, I think he undoubtedly saved my life, pulled me onto his vehicle and drove me off hoping to find a medical unit, and as I passed the headquarters of the...of the Cherry Pickers [11th Hussars], who'd told me to do this job, I made a report of a kind, which was to the effect that, as far as I could see the bridge was okay. Well of course it wasn't, and they put a vehicle on it and the bridge collapsed, so that was a black mark...[600]

In Mike Dauncey's case, by contrast, he is initially put on the back foot, but ultimately outwits his opponent and escapes to fight another day:

> That's when we moved…to the Weverstraat, and that's when I was caught by a sniper, who...tried to kill me, and he put a...I was wearing my red beret and he put the shot too high so it only made my skull bleed, 'cos when it's thin like that you bleed quite a lot. I think that was the first time, and that's when I...[4] had been walking over the road from my house to...to the other side where the guns were, and it caught me out really, but I think in fact the chap must have been frightfully angry 'cos he thought he'd got me dead and I just lay on the ground, and I...'cos I was walking over the road to talk to Chalky and...the bullet went out, and I said-, no, Chalky White, and I said to him 'I'm not going to move for about twenty seconds to make him think I'm going to-...that I'm dead, I won't move at all, but get ready for me to come rather suddenly into your slit', and I waited and-, and then it was about twenty seconds and I think he thought that he'd got me, but he hadn't, and that's when I made a dive across...over to him, and he let out a shot, but of course it was far too late, so that was our first escape.[601]

Bill Partridge's description of being wounded, quoted in full in Chapter Four, is another example of humanising the enemy, in which, after Partridge dallied in the street, 'Of course the guy shot again, and he was a better shot that time';[602] as he gave his

[600] Beach, 1, 15-18.
[601] Dauncey, 2, 55-57.
[602] Partridge, 1, 72.

opponent the opportunity—'getting shot was my own fault wasn't it?'[603]—he is able to imply a level of control over the event. Undoubtedly, in the chaotic circumstances of a battle these incidents could easily have occurred by random chance, but the interviewees prefer to characterise themselves as losers in a sporting contest—in which they are an active player and consoled by losing to a more skilled opponent—rather than victims of an impersonal enemy envisioned as a natural force. This indicates perhaps that the more common narratives of victimhood and impotence may not be a particularly desirable narrative form, but rather one the interviewees are forced into by a combination of their emasculating memories of combat and discourses around veterancy.

Violence and Killing in Accounts of Combat

It is these victim-veteran discourses that presumably ensure that, if veterans are eager to characterise being shot at as a game—and although Joanna Bourke in particular has made much of analogies between wartime killing and sport[604]—none frame the opposite situation in this way. Personal aggression is in fact rarely mentioned, but when it is, it is more common to describe firing as a token gesture of defiance rather than an act of skill. For Doug Mayman the situation was undramatic: 'we met other tank units who fired and us and we fired at them, and it was a question of just who was quickest.'[605] Where a veteran might have been expected to claim the prestige attached to certain skilled and romanticised battlefield roles, this is not done. Partridge

[603] Partridge, 3, 03-04.
[604] Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing: Face-to-Face Killing in Twentieth-Century Warfare* (London, 1999), pp. 14, 62, 140, 232-5; Holmes, *Acts of War*, p. 376.
[605] Mayman, 1, 05-06, 09.

is proud of his success as a leader, but as John Majendie notes has always downplayed any suggestion that he was a killer.[606] Syd West remembers being employed as a sniper after finding a scoped German rifle, but quickly remarks, 'That only lasted two days, it was a dangerous job, so I got shot of that. I only fired two shots'.[607] Possibly this is related to the belief among British soldiers that sniping by the enemy was an underhand tactic—whether they viewed British snipers in the same terms is unclear.

It is possible to acknowledge the active infliction of violence by others: so Partridge speaks little of his personal actions at Briquessard on 28th July 1944, for which he was awarded the Military Medal,[608] but can recall that 'there was a couple of Germans with a bazooka and they couldn't depress for the tank gun so the commander shot them with a Bren gun-, with a Sten gun, he shot 'em with a Sten gun'.[609] Another example is Eric Tipping's description of the 1st Worcesters' attack on the village of Elst, near Arnhem, on 24th September:

> Anyway, off we goes on this attack. We'd gone over a couple of fields and we were into about the second field and we came under fire from our right...the chappie next to me was Corporal Palmer, and as a corporal he had a Sten gun. The rest of the section had a rifle. And as we moved along we came under fire again from right, and I was trying to fathom where this fire was coming from...but we kept slowly moving forward. And...suddenly Corporal Palmer, he run forward, and there was a hedge in front of us, and sprayed this hedge back and forward like that, and he must have spotted it, but I didn't spot it because I was...concerned that we were coming under fire, where the- I couldn't fathom where this, where this fire was coming from, and it was coming from our right...Anyway, when we gets through the hedge, he'd killed the whole [German] section, and he'd shot every one in the head. We went, we went along them, every one had been shot in the head. And,

606 Partridge, 4, 00-02; Majendie, 1, 84.
607 West, 1, 11. Bourke discusses how a 'warrior myth' allowed some combatants to view their sniping as a sporting and chivalrous act: *Killing*, pp. 44-68.
608 Jary, *18 Platoon*, p. 24.
609 Partridge, 1, 55.

> and he won the MM for that. He deserved it really because, you see, had he had not done that, they were letting us get a bit closer, and once-, and we were exposed in the field, it'd have been us that had all been dead, not...not them.[610]

Some have uncovered vivid descriptions of killing in the memoirs of participants,[611] Joanna Bourke in particular arguing that, 'What is striking is the extent to which combatants insisted upon emotional relationships [with those they killed] and responsibility [for killing]', and 'such stories were of immense personal importance with combatants constantly emphasizing (and exaggerating) any rare moments of intimate killing'.[612] However, in this study it has been difficult to find any accounts of killing at all, let alone examples of exaggeration; personal involvement in violence is rarely acknowledged. By and large the interviewees only *imply* inflicting violence where the plot of the story makes this unavoidable, and some demonstrate clear discomposure in attempting to avoid overtly acknowledging such acts.

Robert Purver is typical in describing the closing stages of an attack like so: 'So we went in and for the last hundred yards we just had to charge in, so we did, got the charge, and we went in, and...we took La Chapelle anyway, and so, there's another little story. End of story [laughs].'[613] Yet although he completely avoids discussing the violent details of that occasion, Purver is unusual because later in the interview he admits actually firing at and killing the enemy; however, this was only after being directly prompted and thereby receiving the interviewer's approval. He frames the

[610] Tipping, 1, 33-34.
[611] Bourke, *Fear*, pp. 197-9; French, *Churchill's Army*, p. 152; Holmes, *Acts of War*, pp. 376-80; Ellis, *The Sharp End*, p. 112; Allport, *Browned Off*, p. 262.
[612] Bourke, *Killing*, pp. 4, 7.
[613] Purver, 2, 26.

issue firmly as one of unavoidable self-preservation, from which he derived no pleasure, and ultimately reminds the listener that he was also a victim of events:

> ML: And how...do you ever get affected by German casualties? Obviously you're firing at them, they're dying, how does that affect you, either at the time or afterwards?
>
> RP: It's, it's...it's a mental thing...you've got your target, they're coming for you, you've got to shoot him and you hit him and you see him go down, you know, but it...you don't want to kill anybody. You know...you just wish they'd sort of put their hands up and surrender or something like that, go away, you don't want to shoot anybody, I mean...although you don't think of it at the time, all you think about is 'If I don't get him he's gonna get me' type of thing, you see, but he's some mother's son or somebody's husband, it's the same as we were anyway, you see. But...when you get-, I mean myself...I mean, I could describe myself as a gentle man, I had no aggression, I got no hostility, I'm there because I'm told to go there, I've been recruited...against my will, I don't want to be there, I don't want to shoot anybody, but you've got to, you can't do anything else, you can't just sort of clock off and go home at five o'clock or anything like that, and...as I say you was just open to all the weather, and whatever comes at you really. And it's...a constant mental thing all the time. I can remember sitting in-, I can remember sitting at the bottom of a trench and they were shelling and shelling and shelling and just hoping that the next one wouldn't come in your trench, and...I was thinking, d'you know it'd be lovely if I could just sit there with a little baby on me knee, and I'm gonna get a car and a caravan and I'm gonna tour the country when I get out-, if I get out of this.[614]

It is impossible to know, if the interviewer had asked this question of all the interviewees, how the majority would have reacted, but Robert Purver is the only interviewee to describe killing outright, albeit only very briefly.

There appear to be clear retrospective reasons for the silence on killing in the testimony: killing of any sort remains highly taboo, while in discourses of veterancy victimhood and killing are largely incompatible. Yet if discourses of soldiering

[614] Purver, 2, 35-37.

discourage the telling of certain narratives, this may not necessarily function by *denying* distasteful aspects, but rather by allowing them to safely be left unsaid. As Fred Allison notes, Mike Nation illustrates the devotion to comrades implicit in his identity as a veteran by emphasising treating the wounded; whereas the presence and actions of the enemy demand less attention: 'There is more focus on his fellow Marines, supporting, affirming, and caring for them, than on dealing with the enemy, a perfectly natural state for combat Marines'.[615] Since most people *know* combat in the Second World War involved firing and killing by both sides—certainly, the interviewer and interviewees shared this understanding—it is not always necessary to emphasise this state of affairs or explain why it was the case. The same effect perhaps also facilitates some instances of what might be seen as typically British understatement, as when Syd West describes the uncomfortable situation of dealing with a jammed weapon while 'somebody was having a go at you'.[616]

Reasons to downplay killing may also date from the war itself: British soldiers were not, it seems, natural killers.[617] S.L.A. Marshall—the American military theorist who controversially suggested that only one-quarter of infantrymen fired their weapons in combat—[618]made much of the fact that the American soldier 'comes from a civilization

[615] Allison, 'Remembering a Vietnam War Firefight', p. 80.
[616] West, 1, 34-35.
[617] French, *Churchill's Army*, pp. 151-2.
[618] S.L.A. Marshall, *Men Against Fire* (New York, 1947), p. 50. A range of studies have sought to evaluate Marshall's research methods, and his conclusions have received both support and criticism: see Roger J. Spiller, 'S.L.A. Marshall and the Ratio of Fire', *RUSI Journal*, 133/4 (1988), pp. 63-71; Engen, 'S.L.A. Marshall and the Ratio of Fire', pp. 39-48; Hugh M. Cole, 'S.L.A. Marshall: In Memoriam', *Parameters*, 8/1 (1978), pp. 2-; John Whiteclay Chambers II, 'S.L.A. Marshall's *Men Against Fire*: New Evidence Regarding Fire Ratios', *Parameters* (Autumn, 2003), pp. 113-21; Kelly C. Jordan, 'Right for the Wrong Reasons: S.L.A. Marshall and the Ratio of Fire in Korea', *Journal of Military History*, 66 (January, 2002), pp. 135-62; Fredric Smoler, 'The Secret of the Soldiers Who Didn't Shoot', *American Heritage*, 40/2 (March, 1989), <americanheritage.com/content/secret-

in which aggression, connected with the taking of life, is prohibited and unacceptable. The teaching and the ideals of that civilization are against killing'.[619] Whether or not this social conditioning against killing really prevented most American soldiers from firing, Marshall was surely correct to highlight the gulf between expectations of behaviour in civilian and military life. In British society too killing was, and is, stigmatised, and if public opinion and state propaganda valorised *fighting* this was something quite different from celebrating cold-blooded killing, even of Germans; indeed, revelling in violence was something much more likely to be associated with the enemy than one's own side. Forced into circumstances which necessitated close-range killing, soldiers seem likely to have experienced levels of disillusionment reminiscent of what has in recent years been termed 'moral injury', which arises not from psychological injury but from participating in, or witnessing and failing to prevent, acts which contradict one's deepest moral principles.[620] There is certainly likely to be a traumatic aspect to the silence, in that memories of killing are difficult to think about or articulate, or perhaps even suppressed as a psychological defence mechanism.

Yet practical historical factors support these retrospectively subjective motivations to downplay killing. Many soldiers never found themselves in the position of being able to knowingly kill an enemy; the sort of close-range, face-to-face killing emphasised in war films was rare.[621] The conditions of the modern battlefield, where most combat took place at extreme range and artillery was the biggest killer, 'meant that while

soldiers-who-didn't-shoot> (accessed March, 2018); Dave Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (Boston, 1995).
[619] Marshall, *Men Against Fire*, p. 78.
[620] Jonathan Shay, 'Moral Injury', *Intertexts*, 16/1 (2012), pp. 58-60; Derwin, 'Moral Injury: Two Perspectives', in Leese and Crouthamel (eds.), *Traumatic Memories*, pp. 269-289.
[621] Holmes, *Acts of War*, p. 376; Bourke, *Killing*, p. 4.

people could regularly be seen dying, it was rarer to actually see them being killed'.[622] Undoubtedly, some of the interviewees never saw or (even unknowingly) harmed an enemy soldier. Most firing—even by infantrymen—was speculative and few were consciously aware of having killed, unless they overran an enemy position or their own positions came under close-range assault; even in that case the chaos of battle meant a degree of plausible deniability was achievable over the possibility that one was *personally* responsible for the enemy dead. These circumstances permitted veterans to absolve themselves of blame for the taboo of killing. In this way practical and subjective factors interact to produce the testimony recorded in the interview.

Barry Freeman's account of hunting snipers is worthy of some deeper analysis here. Although it is evident to all involved how these missions must have ended, he avoids quite acknowledging what took place, and prefers to focus on the tactics involved:

> ML: And you were talking Barry about obviously going after the German snipers. How did you actually do that?
>
> BF: Well usually, you'd get to know they were there because they'd had a shot at somebody. And usually, you got into the habit of sort of listening and [inaudible] so you knew approximately where they were, you see. So you'd go, like on that occasion when I got hit on the knee, round the corner of that building, we knew they were up in that top corner of that little square, we didn't know which house they were in, so...One of the tricks was that, you'd say...one window there, one there and one below, or thereabouts, and although he didn't know where we were, you'd fire a round into each of those windows, which in turn confused the sniper, because he knew, or thought he knew, that you didn't know where he was. So usually by tricks like that, and...running up, even running into the buildings we'd caught them before now. But once you can see him and...it didn't bother me, I could hit him quite

[622] Ibid., p. 6.

> easily. Quite easily, yeah. But that one when they hit me in the knee, they got away with it. I didn't hang about. Yeah.[623]

Freeman states that he *could* hit the snipers, even though this was evidently not a hypothetical circumstance, but one in which real face-to-face killing took place.

In the next section of the interview, despite the shared understanding communicated by the phrasing of the question, Freeman struggles for a moment to avoid stating outright that the snipers were killed where they could have been captured, and that he and his comrades kept this secret. Possibly the transgression from proper military conduct is the source of his discomposure, rather than the killing itself; he regains his confidence when justifying his actions, proving the truth of Alan Allport's assertion that 'Snipers were loathed by regular infantrymen and rarely had their surrenders accepted':[624]

> ML: And did you ever take them prisoner or was it...you were just there to finish them off, really?
>
> BF: No, we didn't take 'em prisoner. Technically, you should have done, but...there was only me and three others that used to go after the snipers and had an unwritten rule that...that we would say, we wouldn't let them know that we'd-, what had happened, you know. So...no, it's...when you see them, you know that they are cowards. They hide away to kill some of our blokes. So if you hit them, you get satisfaction from it. Say, 'Well you won't hit any more of our lads'. Yeah.[625]

One can observe here popular understandings of sniping—any lone rifleman tends to be labelled as a sniper, a signifier which has far more to do with emphasising the seriousness of the threat in the eyes of the targeted individual and justifying retaliation than making an objective judgement about the enemy's tactical specialism or

[623] Freeman, 2, 02-04.
[624] Allport, *Browned Off*, p. 263.
[625] Freeman, 2, 04-05.

weaponry. Freeman's account is typical in the way that killing is implied but not directly acknowledged, and how even while the respondent refuses to wholeheartedly admit to killing, the act is justified as self-preservation or retribution for contravening the unwritten rules of war.

Patterns of Narration in Accounts of the 1944-5 Campaign

An important effect to consider when analysing accounts of combat is the way speech reflects experience, so that confusing and disorientating combat experience produces confused and disoriented testimony *about* combat. This effect particularly influences descriptions of the various distinct phases of the 'campaign to victory'. It is a powerful reminder of the importance of analysing each recording as a complete product and, during the interview, providing sufficient time for the narrative to develop. The clearest example is the sense that the Battle of Normandy was one homogeneous and unvaried experience, characterised by bodies, foul odours, debris and destruction, in which it is largely futile to identify changes over time or distinguish between periods of action and inaction. As Syd West notes, it is difficult to remember specific incidents as the battle 'was continuous all the time.'[626] Gabriele Rosenthal has suggested that German memories of the Western Front in the First World War are disorganised because the experience *itself* was chaotic and difficult to make sense of,[627] and the same effect seems evident in the interviewees' recollections of the Normandy campaign. This is only untrue in cases where the individual has researched his wartime activities particularly well, or where he can draw upon an established regimental chronology of

[626] West, 1, 35.
[627] Rosenthal, 'German War Memories', pp. 34-6.

operations; although major changes in terrain, tactical approaches and actual battlefield success took place between the start and end of the Normandy campaign, most describe the entire period in an entirely undifferentiated manner. In this the interviewees, worth quoting at length, mirror a pattern observable in memoirs of the campaign, such as that of David Holbrook, who wrote that Normandy 'stank of dead cattle and dead men, of burning tanks and stores, of stale cordite fumes, of phosphorous and other chemical stenches and of human hatred'.[628]

Ian Hammerton's narrative is typical of the way a number of negative images from an extended period of time are concatenated with little attention paid to the specifics of geography or chronology:

> So we linked up with the Canadians, at Ranville, where the cemetery is now, or nearby where the cemetery is, and they were very pleased to see us. They were in their-, still in their slit trenches, and in front of them there was just bodies af-...bodies after bodies. You couldn't help driving over them, which was not very nice [...] We were held there, being stonked by the enemy, in a field, for some couple of days or so. We made a tentative advance...I got a message over the radio which said 'Tigers in Escoville', so I took a quick look, my gunner said 'Where's Escoville?', I took a quick look at the map, and it was just a few kilometres to our left, but...nothing came of it, I'm happy to say, 'cos we were no match for Tigers and I don't think they were Tigers anyway. We knocked out a German...tank, and...then we had to pull back. I remember, when I walked up there...in front of the position that the Highlanders were in, there was a dead German, and over the days that followed his body got larger and larger and larger, and the stench was awful, because obviously there hadn't been any battlefield clearance at that point, not yet. Then we were pulled back from there and for the rest of our time we were on...constant alert, being used as troops rather than as a squadron by all and sundry, whenever they thought there were mines or enemy tanks they called up for some flails, and so we dashed hither and thither, Tilly-la-Campagne and all sorts of places.[629]

[628] David Holbrook, *Flesh Wounds* (1987), pp. 233-235, quoted in Bond, *Britain's Two World Wars*, p. 82.
[629] Hammerton, 1, 63-67.

Ranville was liberated on D-Day, whereas Tilly-la-Campagne, over eight miles away, would not be captured until 8th August. In a similar way, Geoff Young's 'first impression' becomes an unvarying weeks-long experience, lacking specifics.

> ML: What do you remember of the first time you were actually in action?
>
> GY: Well...the first time I went into action, 130 Brigade, when consisted of us, the Hampshires and the Dorsets, they were a good one as well. They had so many casualties in their first attack, when we came up to take over from them, I couldn't believe it! And...after a fortnight, the bodies were still around, and I know that I had to help dig some dirt up to put on the chaps' faces because of the flies, and I thought 'This is terrible', it was really terrible, there's no doubt about that. That's my first impression. Nobody could pick them up in any case 'cos the barrages that came over were colossal. They had so much ammunition, the Germans...[10] […] we were stuck in our trenches, you see, just talking it, what was coming. We didn't know who was who, it was awful really...[4]but there's so many casualties, and I were- you were helping each other as much as you could, yes it's...[4] it was really a bad time, there's no doubt about that.'[630]

For Joe Ekins too, the experience of his first two months in Normandy before the TOTALIZE night march can be summed up in one brief and non-specific overview:

> ...I mean it were, there were...bodies all over the place, until they got...and there were more people coming into the bridgehead so the bridgehead were...getting packed, you know, so there were less place for you to, to move, and...we would sit there and of course we were being shelled all the time, and...you could hear the eighty-eights coming or the Moaning Minnies, and...you'd put mates under, my best mate were killed the second day we were over there, you were losing people all the time, and the stench...some of the tanks were terrible, there were dead animals lay there on their back with their feet blown, all blown up, you know and...and probably...the most distressing thing, more distressing perhaps than the bodies, was you'd see a hedgerow where the infantry had been fighting, and...all that were left there would be all their personal kit. There were photos laying around, bits of letters, perhaps a couple of mess tins, cigarette packets, all in the bottom of a

[630] Young, 1, 07-09.

> hedge, which were all that were left of the...people who were in there, you know...it was really terrible, really terrible.[631]

John Majendie, initially questioned about Hill 112, evokes a typical assortment of confused images:

> ...112, I think my...I think my main memory is noise and the place...well even well before that, Normandy stunk, it absolutely stunk, the dead animals, dead humans...well in fact funnily enough the worst smell I ever smelt in my life was at Eterville when a German...limber...towed by two horses in a lane had been...they'd been killed, and I've never ever, I wasn't actually sick, but I've never, ever smelt anything like it, and...there wasn't really time to do any-, everybody blows up and cattle, all turned over on their backs, they did...when we came back initially from 112, to, in...just on the edge of Mouen I suppose, I know there were some extremely dead cows in the field we were in and, and a sapper bulldozer came and tried to bulldoze them...in, but that and the...the noise, and the noise was sort of, you had peaceful times, but during the actual attack going up...everything was coming behind us in every direction, I mean...our gunners were...I think our divisional artillery fired forty-three thousand shells in the first day, and...which is a lot of shells, and the, the Boche were...doing about the same, and I think the incessant noise that went on, and of course...you weren't really, I've often tried to sort of think what I could actually see when we were trying to dig in initially, and you weren't really very interested in looking over there or over there, you were only interested in doing what you were doing. Awful lot of smoke around from burning vehicles...[632]

'The depths of frustration that were being felt by British soldiers'[633] after several weeks engaged with the enemy in Normandy form a key feature of the veterans' recollections, as in this extract from Bill Partridge's interviews, which further suggests that the 'Valley of Death' near Hill 112, and the nearby villages such as Mouen and Maltot, was something of an epicentre of carnage:

> D company were split off from the 4th battalion, went to help out another brigade that was putting in an attack...I think it was on Maltot, and we were in an orchard above guarding their right flank. You've never

[631] Ekins, 1, 17-18.
[632] Majendie, 1, 49-52.
[633] Allport, *Browned Off*, pp. 187-8.

> been in a place like that in all your life, with dead Germans, burnt out tanks, dead crews, dead animals, the smell of rotting flesh and cordite. I've never been anywhere like it, I never want to go anywhere like it again, it was really really terrible […] you can't imagine how soul destroying it was to be in that orchard with all those dead bodies of animals and people .[634]

One veteran, Alan Hitchcock, does describe Normandy as a period of movement, as his division redeployed to various sectors of the front; but he does this to emphasise the quality of the 43rd (Wessex) compared with the more 'static' Germans, has a good knowledge of the division's battles developed after the war, and, crucially, was wounded and evacuated in early August, so had no chance to witness the very different experience of the breakout.[635] The veterans by and large agree with Sydney Jary that, 'In retrospect, Normandy is now a surrealistic dream, totally lacking the stark clarity of memories of subsequent battles: a pastiche of heat, dust, the stench of bloated cattle, the litter of dead tanks, rusting guns and wildly scattered grenades and small arms ammunition'.[636]

The claustrophobic and disjointed accounts of Normandy are starkly different from what follows: the feeling of freedom and openness which pertained during the breakout is evident. Some of the interviewees remark on this directly:

> It was different, it was...fighting in the, in the trenches and under that shellfire et cetera. Very demoralising and...a very hard life, and then after you came off of 112 it was more fluid, you know, you were five miles here and fight a battle, and five miles there and fight another battle. And...so you were moving around and, and you weren't living in trenches, so much, and...by the time we got out of Normandy all of a sudden […] it was very different, the latter stages of fighting.[637]

[634] Partridge, 1, 58-61.
[635] Hitchcock, 1, 43-44.
[636] Jary, *18 Platoon*, p. 6.
[637] Partridge, 3, 3-4. See also Spittles, 5, 54-56.

In other accounts the shift in the pattern of fighting is merely implied, often as much by structure as by language: disjointed stories with little sense of time and place give way to tightly and precisely narrated chronologies, while the tone shifts from downbeat to hopeful. Joe Ekins, although putting a characteristically negative spin on events—'What it amounted to, you just advanced until some bugger shot at you, you know, and...hoped you got [laughs] away with it'[638]—nonetheless begins to imply movement and action, naming some of the places on the route of advance and even remarking that 'Belgium weren't too bad'.[639] Colin Criddle recalls 'really having the feeling that one was going forward, quicker. And you were seeing that you were, I won't say winning, but making progress. Your expectations or your...was a little bit higher.'[640] This again reflects the memoirs, which make much of how 'Soldiers who had become habituated to a fortnight's gruelling battle over a couple of hundred yards of no-man's land now drove along country roads for dozens, sometimes hundreds of miles a day without encountering a single German'.[641] As Tom Dutton remembers, 'We didn't dug anything, 'cos it was wonderful, the people was shouting, it was...it was just uncanny that there was a war on, that the war had passed over it so quickly.'[642] Barry Freeman remarks that 'we'd crossed-, gone through Belgium like nobody's business, in no time at all.'[643] Whereas the close-quarters fighting in the cramped Normandy beachhead was confusing, disorientating and continuously stressful and unsafe, the advance after the breakout was a period of relief, with the hardest fighting

[638] Ekins, 1, 44.
[639] Ekins, 1, 44-48.
[640] Criddle, 1, 31-32.
[641] Allport, *Browned Off*, p. 190.
[642] Dutton, 1, 25-26.
[643] Freeman, 1, 22.

over, appreciable daily progress being made, and relatively scant opposition encountered—a situation, albeit still dangerous and demanding, that enabled participants to properly process events as they took place.

Later stages of the campaign demonstrate a less evident 'zeitgeist', but some themes are nonetheless evident, such as the disappointment felt when the front stabilised again in Autumn 1944,[644] the relentless discomfort of the winter battles,[645] and the sense of freedom which pertained once the German border was finally crossed.[646]

One should be wary of ascribing too complex an explanation to such shifts in imagery. One could evoke a popular memory of the Battle of Normandy which has congealed in the years since; but, as J. P. Roos points out, it is not necessary to invoke subjectivity if the narrative under consideration can be more simply explained as a reflection of reality.[647] Accounts of Normandy show similarities not because all the veterans have been converted to a certain point of view after the fact—there is still more than sufficient variety to demonstrate that their accounts are primarily individual—but because that was how the Battle of Normandy and the subsequent breakout were actually experienced. Oral testimony does therefore appear to be a useful source on the experience of campaign and combat, whether information is drawn directly from interviewees' statements or from the patterns of narration in their accounts.

[644] Tout, 2, 75-77; Mayman, 2, 10-11.
[645] Ford, 3, 37-38; Mayman, 2, 10, 12; Criddle, 1, 47-48; Procter, 1, 21-22; Askew, 1, 15-16; Laws, 2, 14; West, 1, 20; Edwardes, 1, 81-82.
[646] West, 1, 20; Mayman, 2, 21-22; Eglington, 1, 17; Procter, 1, 27; Criddle, 1, 56-58.
[647] Roos, '"Reality or Nothing"', in Rogers and Leydesdorff (eds.), *Trauma*, pp. 215-6.

Morale in Veterans' Testimony

Oral testimony can also, of course, be used to assess morale, defined as 'the willingness of an individual or group to prepare for or engage in an action required by an authority or institution; this willingness may be engendered by a positive desire for action and/or by the discipline to accept orders to take such action'.[648] Since respondents' concern is to tell a broad narrative of their war with a focus on front-line life, oral history is more effective at indicating the kind of factors which could affect morale, than highlighting unequivocally all of those which did. For example, the interviewees speak little about discipline, man-management, propaganda, Army education, entertainment, and views of senior commanders, although arguably this is because those factors were unimportant in relation to front-line life. Presumably there were a host of 'local' factors, such as the command styles of officers, relations with peers and the circumstances in which the unit found itself, which were very important influences on the morale of particular individuals at particular times, but these tend not to be regarded as worthy of much attention and, in any case, are difficult to verify and contextualise. The testimony does, however, illuminate several pertinent determinants of morale; Jonathan Fennell is probably correct to identify one of the problems in the study of morale as an over-dependence on personal sources,[649] but by the same token ignoring personal sources entirely would also be limiting.

Rather than restricted scope, the main problem with drawing judgements on morale from veterans' testimony is likely to be their tendency to present a more positive image

[648] Fennell, *Combat and Morale*, p. 9.
[649] Fennell, *Combat and Morale*, pp. 3-4, 7.

than was really the case. One should not expect interviewees to recount potentially embarrassing tales of the dejection and depression which must have been fairly common on introduction to Army life; indeed, Stan Procter has written of crying himself to sleep on his first night in barracks, but mentions nothing of this when interviewed, recalling instead how 'I seemed to be enjoying myself'.[650] Judgements on inter-personal relations must be approached warily as respondents are likely to neglect to mention, or have forgotten, those they particularly disliked, and remember those they had good relations with. Generally time will serve to moderate strongly-felt opinions, while in hindsight a sense of solidarity between veterans or respect for the dead might cause major resentments to be concealed. There is little evidence for or against the morale problems which have been identified in particular British formations, such as 43rd (Wessex) Division, in which many of the interviewees served.[651] Presumably individuals lacked the context to identify morale in their units as particularly bad, or perhaps hindsight simply encourages overly positive assessments. It is probably no coincidence that Bill Edwardes, who describes at some length how morale in the 1st Worcesters was ebbing badly by the later stages of the campaign, was a medic, socially distanced to an extent from the rank-and-file infantrymen of his battalion and therefore able to make a more objective assessment of their attitudes.[652]

[650] S. C. Procter, *A Quiet Little Boy Goes to War*, IWM Documents 5636 1996/09/24; Procter, 1, 02. See also Allport, *Browned Off*, pp. 73-4.
[651] Beevor, *D-Day*, p. 280.
[652] Edwardes, 1, 37-38, 79-80.

Nonetheless, many different morale issues are discussed. Fennell has argued that 'it is clear that no one factor can explain the causes of good and poor morale',[653] and there is potential for oral history to contribute to building up a well-rounded and sufficiently complex picture of morale. In particular the positive consensus on Army welfare can hardly be ignored. Such statements may be considered suspiciously rosy, but they reflect the literature which argues that British soldiers in Northwest Europe were especially well cared for.[654] Rations are remembered as plentiful and of good quality: 'Talk about food to feed an army, there was enough food to feed umpteen armies, and it was quite good food as well.'[655] Soldiers also seem to have been impressed by the evident scale and complexity of the logistical system at their backs;[656] the postal system receives praise from the infantry,[657] whereas for 'tankies' 'the impressive thing was, for us that...the way in which if you lost a tank you simply walked a mile or two back down the line and you were directed to a delivery squadron where you found a new tank ready for action, and you simply got in and brought it back to your rendezvous.'[658] Officers stress the responsiveness of the medical system and view it as an essential factor in high morale;[659] from other ranks' point of view, prompt medical attention seems to have been a fact of army service which requires little explanation, which is its own kind of praise.[660] Overall the interviews demonstrate that British soldiers believed they were well looked after.

[653] Fennell, *Combat and Morale*, p. 280.
[654] Allport, *Browned Off*, p. 183; Jary, *18 Platoon*, pp. 71, 88; French, *Churchill's Army*, p. 143.
[655] Laws, 2, 05, 15-16; Spittles, 1, 123; Purver, 2, 48-49; Majendie, 1, 40-41; Askew, 1, 08; Young, 1, 62-63.
[656] Ford, 1, 19, 21, 29-30; Laws, 2, 04.
[657] Majendie, 1, 38-39; Hutchinson, 3, 14-15; Beach, 1, 12-13.
[658] Tout, 2, 02-03; Spittles, 4, 07-08; Ekins, 1, 38.
[659] Hunt, 1, 114, 117-120; Ford, 3, 15; Wake, 1, 40.
[660] Purver, 2, 12-14; Dutton, 1, 59; Partridge, 1, 40, 72-74; Young, 1, 50-52; Criddle, 1, 88-89.

Recollections of inter-rank relations are worth highlighting in some more detail. Unsurprisingly, no officer is in the least bit critical of his men.[661] The amount of attention officer interviewees devote to the morale and performance of the men they commanded, as opposed to their personal concerns, is testament to the strength of wartime paternalism and its effect on later recollection.[662] Somewhat less predictably, the other ranks are also overwhelmingly positive about their officers.[663] Although oral testimony cannot usually illuminate the fraught relations which must sometimes have existed in units, it does demonstrate the senses of loyalty and obligation which defined inter-rank relations. It also highlights a neglected aspect of morale, the role played by NCOs. Although the British Army is generally thought to have established a relatively poor record of nurturing talented NCOs by comparison with the Germans,[664] the interviews make clear at various points the important contribution made by these men. Some examples take the form of potentially self-serving, but probably honest, assessments by NCOs themselves. Reg Spittles stresses his paternalistic role as a corporal tank commander, for example when it came to selecting a crew:

> …the three boys, having come freshly from a training regiment, having done ten weeks' training, almost just come straight from school, discipline was instilled in 'em. And there's another factor. I was twenty-five years old. I was seven years older. I was like a father. I was an old man. And so, it's like them being told something by their father. They respond to the discipline of an old person. You don't have to discipline 'em, you tell 'em and they think, you know, 'poor old bugger'. But it gave you an advantage, that age gap of seven years.[665]

[661] Dauncey, 1, 11-12, 15; Hutchinson, 3, 04, 16-17; Wake, 1, 05.
[662] Wake, 1, 08-09, 38; Hutchinson, 3, 62-63; Cox, 1, 22.
[663] Hitchcock, 1, 05; Mayman, 1, 25-26; Procter, 1, 30-31; Young, 1, 86.
[664] French, *Churchill's Army*, pp. 57, 77-8.
[665] Spittles, 1, 115-116.

Spittles maintains that on only one occasion was his authority challenged, in a dispute about leave rather than anything as imperative as combat motivation.[666]

Positive assessments of NCOs also come from private soldiers—there are numerous remarks as to the nurturing roles played by sergeants and corporals, which were important enough to motivate fond recollections seventy years on.[667] Tom Dutton, for instance, discusses a beloved lance-corporal, Freddie Baker, who along with the section corporal 'took me under [his] wing' and 'generally nursed me right up to the day he got killed', concluding that 'I thought the world of him'.[668] Such recollections are far more common than complaints about irresponsible and negligent NCOs, a situation which is unlikely to be entirely the result of the mollifying effects of hindsight. Officers also evidently appreciated the competence of many NCOs: as Robert Ford attests, when casualties among officers occurred, 'What was rather remarkable was that people like sergeants and corporals could take over. They were so experienced, they could take over straight away if an officer was killed or wounded, and perfectly capable, do it just as well too...because they were normally hardened and experienced people.'[669] There is little evidence in the testimony which implies the Army experienced any particular problems promoting capable NCOs, but there is much evidence of their important leadership role. The positive recollections of the veterans of the role played by officers as well as NCOs strongly suggests that inspiring leadership was a vital component of good morale.

[666] Spittles, 1, 124-133.
[667] Gordon, 1, 06; Ekins, 1, 44-46; Tout, 2, 91-93.
[668] Dutton, 1, 81-87.
[669] Ford, 3, 20-21.

Narrating Loss and Desensitisation

What seems certain is that if good support and leadership could inculcate a high willingness to engage in combat, this did not mean combat was ever easy;[670] it is difficult to overstate how damaging, disillusioning and traumatic the experience could be, and oral evidence captures this well. One of the particularly demoralising aspects of battle was the indiscriminate nature of the violence; it was easy to feel hard-done-by because 'the hazards of battle were infuriatingly uneven'.[671] As Tipping remarks, 'although I found many many times that it...in the army you're all together, in action can be a very individual... individual...thing, and...and it's strange how you could-, you'd do an attack and one, one section has a hard battle and yet another one...there's hardly anything happening.'[672] Edwin Hunt recalls that while his company dug in after landing in Normandy, another failed to do so and on 7th June sustained some seventy casualties from German artillery, ''cos they were in tents and not in weapon slits, so they didn't have weapon slits and got killed, we did have and we weren't attacked.'[673] Richard Holmes has suggested that casualties resulting from accidents are likely to be especially distressing;[674] it is perhaps for this reason that Luis Dimarco highlights one particular incident right at the end of his interview:

> …there was an explosion, and a scream, and a sergeant, Scottish sergeant he was, he died. How it happened I don't know, 'cause it was dark, and it- he wasn't that close to me, but I say, you know, somebody said...he was saying 'What the bloody hell's happening?', you know, we

[670] Gary Sheffield, 'Dead Cows and Tigers: Some Aspects of the British Soldier's Experience in Normandy, 1944', in John Buckley (ed.), *The Normandy Campaign: Sixty Years On* (Abingdon, 2006), p. 125.
[671] Allport, *Browned Off*, p. 212.
[672] Tipping, 1, 123-124.
[673] Hunt, 1, 131-132.
[674] Holmes, *Acts of War*, pp. 190-1.

> were all supposed to be quiet, but somehow the hand grenade went off on him, killed him...[14][675]

The unpredictability of sudden death or wounding left some soldiers with a damaging combination of disillusionment and survivor's guilt. Colin Criddle recalls returning from leave in Antwerp only to be told "'You lost your section this morning, on the way in, a shell pitched amongst 'em", and...my mate was amongst them, and he was one of three killed and all the rest was very badly injured, and...which was very disturbing really, and making you think, really "Why am I still...how is it I'm still here?"'[676] Several valued members of Geoff Young's battalion were killed on one day as he too was returning from leave, prompting a similar reaction: 'Now that's the luck of the draw, isn't it?...[4] Why does that happen? But there you are.'[677] For survivors, the distinction between dead and wounded comrades was often less meaningful than one might assume. Burying killed comrades, even if 'it breaks your heart',[678] might at least allow for a sense of closure, but ironically the efficiency of the medical services meant the wounded would simply disappear without warning, never to be seen again, and judging by the frequency of statements to this effect in the testimony this could be highly demoralising.[679]

All the interviewees were questioned about their reactions to casualties among comrades. Attempts to dodge this question form one of the curious patterns in the testimony; some interviewees discuss the practical rather than emotional effect of

[675] Dimarco, 3, 128.
[676] Criddle, 1, 49-50.
[677] Young, 1, 86-87.
[678] Howson, 1, 05.
[679] Ekins, 1, 57; Ford, 3, 12; West, 1, 36.

casualties, which presumably reflects a desire not to dwell on the emotional impact of losses. One example appears in the account of Hereward Wake:

> ML: How did losing your men affect you? How did you cope with casualties, obviously with the men under you?
>
> HW: It was all very well organised...We had a medical officer and each company had stretcher-bearers, I had two stretcher-bearers under my command, and they'd been taught about first aid, and anybody [who] got wounded or hurt, my stretcher-bearers would rescue them, from no-man's-land, very often, and...they went back and were looked after.[680]

Another example comes from Ted Howson: '…people don't realise that you see them there, they're wounded, but...you don't cope with casualties, you go by 'em, and it's only when you come back, in them days. You see, we was on the move…'[681] Similarly, Robert Ford ruminates briefly on the emotional impact of casualties, in evident discomfort, before shifting to the safer matter of medical procedures.[682]

Most of the interviewees in this study do discuss their feelings quite candidly, however, especially the rankers—again there is a difference in openness between officers and other ranks. Initial encounters with wounded men and dead bodies incited varying reactions. Harry Askew, stationed at the large base hospital at Arromanches, recalls that the wounded who arrived 'affected me a lot...you know, I couldn't sleep for thinking about 'em, a couple, three days, you know because they were only young lads the same as my age. When we landed the first thing I see was a...a pile of dead

[680] Wake, 1, 40.
[681] Howson, 1, 36-37.
[682] Ford, 3, 12-16.

Germans. Now I'd never seen dead people before...[7]'.[683] Others, such as Bill Partridge, were less affected:

> BP: We supported the Scottish, the Fifteenth Scottish, that was our first sort of action. We followed them and I saw my first...dead body...cos I wondered how I would react to that.
>
> ML: And how did that affect you?
>
> BP: Not so badly as I thought it might have done. It was...obviously something I had to accept, and that was that.[684]

There is strong agreement on the effect of repeatedly witnessing violence: most report not only coming to terms with casualties, but becoming accustomed to death, even callous. In Syd West's recollection, 'you just think, well, bad luck at him but at least I'm still alive, I know it's a hard way to look at it but it was there every day. You'd be with a chap one day and the next day you'd buried him [...] you couldn't afford to have too many feelings in case you joined them.'[685] Criddle displays evident discomfort when admitting this:

> I suppose...in the beginning it was, it was hard to lose...a mate or so on and...but, although it's difficult to say this...but...seeing so many casualties, and knowing of other people in different companies and that that have lost...you're...What can I say?...Resigned yourself, to think yourself, well, 'I'm thankful to be here', you know...and...it's difficult to say you get hardened to it, that's a very crude way, you know, you don't get hardened to anybody, to losing anybody, but the...the blow, you know, the loss, isn't so difficult to...you know, to overcome, really...[686]

Victor Gregg, on the other hand, maintains in a characteristically brash manner that 'you...don't make a song and dance about it […] you just mention it as a...probably

[683] Askew, 1, 07-08.
[684] Partridge, 1, 12.
[685] West, 1, 08. See also Hitchcock, 1, 37.
[686] Criddle, 1, 103-105.

with a twinge of regret...'[687] In the case of his platoon's first casualty (mentioned also in Gregg's book), 'I don't remember anybody crying over his bones, treat him with respect, yeah, we buried him, stood round and...but...I don't recall any great emotion over it.'[688] Doug Mayman is also blunt about the desensitisation he experienced:

> DM: You kept hearing of friends who were killed, that was always the problem. You know, there was always somebody killed every day.
>
> ML: And how does that, or did that, or does it affect you?
>
> DM: Well, you soon got used to it [laughs]. Odd, isn't it, you do, you just felt sorry 'cos you knew the guy so well, yeah...[689]

Robert Ford concurs:

> …I think the awful thing is that we became more callous. We did, undoubtedly, become more callous, and...people being killed, if they weren't people who were personal friends, meant less. I cant say more than that. […] We became used to it. I mean every night, we learned that another four members of the regiment, their tank had been brewed up, knocked out, we probably knew them, and it was very sad, but you just became attuned to it…[690]

Luis Dimarco believes that during the Battle of Arnhem, with no option but to carry on, his mind shut out disturbing sights as a self-defence mechanism: on witnessing casualties, 'automatically you...your brain clamps down, you shut down, on it all, you-, you face it, you don't let it bother you, shut it out of your mind and carry on. I mean I'm looking at a bloke dying in front of me, I had nothing I could do for him, I-, but it

[687] Gregg, 2, 74-75.
[688] Gregg, 2, 75-76.
[689] Mayman, 1, 24-25.
[690] Ford, 3, 13-16.

never went in, it just shuts it out...[6]'. It was only later that 'the repercussions come, it's not at the time.'[691]

This desensitisation was certainly exacerbated by the unrelenting pressure of front-line life, which had clear effects on morale:

> …you knew, as an infantrymen, your job wouldn't stop until the war ended, 'cos I mean it was continuous, wasn't it, it was ongoing […] we'd have a hard battle, dig in, just settled in, word'd come, 'Ready to move in half an hour', what for? 'Another attack', you know...Especially when...the pressure was on through the Siegfried line, and I mean there was no let up. So...you didn't have time for niceties of friendships and that.[692]

Robert Purver remembers that in the front line, 'you're constantly bored, if there's no action, not that you want any action, but you're bored…and […] your heart is in your mouth constantly, waiting for orders, and when you do get orders, "What the hell are we going into this time?", you know, so "What's up there next?", you know.'[693] The result, according to Tom Dutton, was that 'you'd always be alert, you...it weren't like normal, it wasn't, you wasn't normal, let's put it like that, you become an animal, you know, it's instinct to survival…'[694]

In describing this desensitisation to a modern civilian audience there is a danger of appearing insensitive, and most therefore express such feelings with some embarrassment and regret. In this way stretcher-bearer Bill Edwardes describes seeing his first dead body, during EPSOM:

[691] Dimarco, 3, 125-126.
[692] Tipping, 1, 126-127.
[693] Purver, 2, 34.
[694] Dutton, 1, 11. See also Gregg, 2, 35-36.

> …as we were moving up the line, just before the village of Cheux, the farmyard that I spoke of on the DVD...was full of vehicles, and I looked in as we went by and I saw this six-tonne truck driver over his...steering wheel with part of his head gone, and do you know, Matthew...what I first thought, my first thought, and I've wondered whether I ought to feel ashamed of it, but I looked at that guy and I said, 'Well, I won't have to check his breathing', and moved on, and that was-, I suppose that's training, that's what you do, you've got a casualty, you assess it, you do something or you move on...[695]

Jack Eglington, as has been seen, is quite content to discuss violence, but it is telling that he points out that he was not the only one who felt so blasé at the time:

> ML: So how, Jack, how did you cope when you see people being killed? 'Cos obviously you were very close, with the carriers.
>
> JE: Well you didn't, you accepted it, you accepted it, you got hardened to it, you got hardened to it, I mean...I had a bloke there, he had has arm blown off, or not blown off, all smashed to...in, to, I mean he turned round and said 'Anybody got a big shell bandage', whap a shell bandage on, call a stretcher bearer, that's it, you, you, you, you accepted it, I expect that's what the other ones said, you, you, you accept these things, and you got used to it…[696]

Stan Procter reflects on his reaction to casualties that 'I can't quite figure how I thought. I mean I didn't get-, it didn't get me dejected for some reason, I don't know why', just before breaking down in tears.[697] Negotiating with popular discourses around war experience, which place an emphasis on mourning and remembrance of the dead and tend to presume that deep and lasting emotional trauma was ubiquitous among survivors, can, ironically, be difficult for those veterans whose reactions were more muted.

[695] Edwardes, 1, 15-16.
[696] Eglington, 1, 20.
[697] Procter, 1, 24. See also Criddle, 1, 103-105; Partridge, 1, 60-61.

Nonetheless, the way the interviewees are able to articulate so clearly the dehumanising effects of witnessing death and violence strongly demonstrates the usefulness of oral history for illuminating past attitudes. Once again, it is evident that the interviewees do not take on the easiest possible identity of morally unblemished victims when telling their stories; instead, they grapple with the difficult, disturbing and morally problematic emotions induced by their honest recollections of their wartime experiences.

In spite of the possible problems, it is clear that oral history can make a useful contribution to assessing the factors which influence morale. Studies of morale which have taken a more quantitative approach struggle to explain the psychological context of morale, whereas oral history's ability to elicit opinions about, for example, the reasons active service produced feelings of desensitisation towards death on both sides, demonstrate the value of personal evidence for achieving a well-rounded picture of morale. Furthermore, it is possible to draw some tentative judgements from the testimony about how far the British Army's morale held up through the campaign. British soldiers felt generally well cared for and well led, and this appears to have been vital in maintaining a level of morale sufficient to keep them at their tasks. Yet at the same time a great many individuals evidently experienced disillusionment and dejection due to their combat experiences, and it appears likely that this led fairly directly to a situation in many units in which, as Edwardes describes, 'any opportunity, any chance to get out of battle was being mopped up by the blokes'.[698] Nonetheless, there is no evidence of outright shirking, refusal to fight or anything which could be

[698] Edwardes, 1, 37-8.

called a widespread collapse in morale. Ultimately the interviews support previous conclusions that while British soldiers showed little outright enthusiasm or zeal for combat, this 'should not be confused with poor morale',[699] and while individuals came under major strain the Army avoided serious morale problems.[700] The consequences of this lack of enthusiasm for the way the Army went about its task of gaining victory in the field represent a separate question, to be assessed in the next chapter.

[699] French, *Churchill's Army*, p. 122.
[700] Sheffield, 'Dead Cows and Tigers', in Buckley (ed.), *The Normandy Campaign*, p. 125.

Chapter 7
Doctrine and Battlefield Conduct

The final issue to be confronted in this thesis is what veterans' testimony can tell us about doctrine: 'the understanding of the methods of actual fighting accepted at any given time'.[701] These shared ideas about how to fight are generally seen as deriving fairly directly from the principles according to which troops were instructed. Yet many of the conventional sources—training manuals, memoranda or reports on manoeuvres—and the studies based on them,[702] can be problematic because there is little certainty practice ever mirrored the theory: 'one cannot assume that what the manual said was what the soldiers did'.[703] Oral history seems to offer a way to assess actual battlefield conduct, and indeed suggests that combat behaviour did diverge significantly from the ideal methods espoused in training.

This potential appears especially valuable in relation to the British Army, which offers a particular challenge where doctrine is concerned, because it is a matter of continued debate whether it had a consistent doctrine at all. At least at the beginning of the war, 'Manuals stated general principles but did not provide concrete examples to illustrate how those principles should be put into practice'; instead, commanders were allowed great latitude to interpret doctrine as they saw fit.[704] Although from 1942 Montgomery

[701] Charles Forrester, *Monty's Functional Doctrine: Combined Arms Doctrine in British 21st Army Group in Northwest Europe, 1944-5* (Warwick, 2015), p. 192.
[702] Timothy Harrison Place, *Military Training in the British Army, 1940-1944: From Dunkirk to D-Day* (London, 2000), p. 5; Bull, *Infantry Tactics.*
[703] Place, *Military Training*, p. 17; de Lee, 'Oral History', in Addison and Calder (eds.), *Time to Kill*, p. 367; Terry Copp, *Fields of Fire: The Canadians in Normandy* (Toronto, 2003), pp. 14-15; Engen, *Canadians Under Fire*, p. 12.
[704] French, *Raising Churchill's Army*, pp. 22-3, 46-7, 280-3.

insisted a common doctrine was applied by army and corps commanders, it is debatable whether this had a significant impact at the tactical level.[705] The lack of a consistent doctrine governing the conduct of troops in the absence of direct supervision has long been identified as one of the British Army's main shortcomings, allowing indecision and inflexibility to persist.[706] On the other hand, Timothy Harrison Place has argued that that doctrine which did exist tended to stifle initiative, not nurture it.[707] More recent commentators, such as John Buckley, have suggested that Montgomery's failure to institute a consistent doctrine was beneficial, allowing commanders the freedom to develop appropriate methods to the problems they faced, and ultimately 'A problem-solving approach to combat…proved to be an effective method of dealing with the enemy'.[708] Charles Forrester, by contrast, has described a complex model according to which both the 'bubble up' from the lower levels of command of ideas which worked, and institutionalisation of these from the top by Montgomery, contributed to an appropriate and consistently enforced British combined arms doctrine by early 1945.[709]

Oral history seems to hold the potential to cut through such debates, offering the ability to consult eyewitnesses to discover how things were really done. One way of doing this is through the sort of 'tactical snippeting' approach advocated by Paddy Griffith, the collection and comparison of many examples of practical tactical technique, which, he argued, 'really forms the essential homework which a serious

[705] Ibid., pp. 249, 252; Buckley, *Monty's Men*, p. 36.
[706] D'Este, *Decision in Normandy,* p. 284.
[707] Place, *Military Training*, p. 173-5.
[708] Copp, *Fields of Fire*, p. 29; Buckley, *Monty's Men*, pp. 36-37, 301-2.
[709] Forrester, *Monty's Functional Doctrine*, pp. 180-9.

student must do before he can get to grips with the heart of his subject'. He regarded personal accounts as a vital component, as they give 'a far more immediate impression of the battlefield than any number of drill manuals or tactical treatises. What the participants retained in their minds strongly enough to wish to tell us is surely precisely the sort of thing which we ought to be dissecting most carefully'. Although Griffith had written memoirs in mind, oral history can fulfil the same role for more recent conflicts, helping to correct the fact 'too many tactical historians try to get by on airy generalisations which are demonstrably false'—a tendency Terry Copp in particular has criticised in assessments of the Normandy campaign.[710]

Behaviour in Combat

The testimony can indeed reveal much about what combat looked like at the tactical level. Although popular historical and cultural representations tend towards a mechanistic and deterministic interpretation of battle tactics in which the attributes of the actors involved (with an emphasis on their weapons and vehicles) led to predictable outcomes,[711] much of the testimony suggests that many behaviours—for example, the willingness and enthusiasm of troops to engage in firefights and to withdraw or surrender—were governed by a number of unwritten rules which are much more difficult to define. Since it was rare indeed for any engagement in Northwest Europe to become a fight to the last man (encounters with the Hitler Youth were the notable exception)[712] conduct in battle must have been governed by certain

[710] Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the American Civil War*, pp. 194-6; Copp, *Fields of Fire*, pp. 8-13
[711] Bull, *Infantry Tactics*, viii-ix; Buckley, *Monty's Men*, p. 37; Spiller, 'S.L.A. Marshall and the Ratio of Fire', p. 69.
[712] Copp, *Fields of Fire*, p. 83.

understandings as to how aggressively attacks ought to be pushed, and what level of resistance could be regarded as sufficient before a defender could justify withdrawing. In other words, battle was ritualised to an extent, with participants moderating their actions for a variety of reasons, most commonly self-preservation and a distaste of killing.[713] Tony Ashworth's research on the 'live and let live' system of mutual non-aggression in the First World War is well known.[714] Parallels exist in the Second World War, such as the tactic for Crocodile flamethrower tanks to burn a haystack within sight of the enemy in order to demonstrate the consequences if they failed to retreat or surrender. As Terry Copp has pointed out, 'Combat was subject to…rational analysis. Orders were negotiated, amended or ignored as individual decision-makers engaged in calculations of risk versus gain'.[715] James Roberts has demonstrated that on the Western Front in 1914-18 'surrendering the objective to safety, in the face of heavy hostile fire, was commonplace infantry combat behaviour. By such means the infantry decided an objective's worth, and lived to fight another day'. The 'fog of war' which limited the influence of senior commanders on front line events ensured that by the time they could react, the infantry's decision had become a *fait accompli*.[716]

The oral testimony analysed in this study heavily suggests that this was also widespread in the 1944-5 campaign. As a rule, it seems that the overwhelming desire was to avoid confrontation with the enemy whenever possible. Such behaviour reflects wartime theorising by Lionel Wigram, who developed the battle drill training adopted

[713] For examples in pre-modern warfare see John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (London, 1993), pp. 94-115, 131-2, 387.
[714] Ashworth, *Trench Warfare*.
[715] Copp, *Fields of Fire*, p. 14; Engen, *Infantry Effectiveness*, p. 10.
[716] James Roberts, *Killer Butterflies: Combat, Psychology and Morale in the British 19th (Western) Division 1915-18* (Solihull, 2011), pp. 121, 260-1.

by the British Army in 1941, and S.L.A. Marshall, that most soldiers would take no active involvement in combat.[717] Combat theorists, somewhat uncritically following Marshall, tend to place much emphasis on human beings' innate resistance to killing,[718] and neglect other factors such as tactical benefits to non-confrontation[719] and, particularly, self-preservation; even a highly motivated soldier who is willing to kill is likely to avoid placing himself in undue peril. Self-preservation was the key factor ensuring that for soldiers desiring to survive the first reaction on receiving enemy fire was to go to ground or to bypass it. Tipping recalls jumping through a head-height shell hole in a wall to escape a road which was under fire: 'it's surprising what fear-, if somebody'd said, 'Jump through that hole', you'd have said 'No way', you know. But fear, we went-, well I didn't touch the sides!'.[720]

More than just an individual impulse, the desire *not* to fight transcended the individual and meant the risks entire units or sub-units were willing to run often fell substantially short of what might conceivably have been attempted according to a mechanistic reading of the situation. During the attack on Briquessard, Partridge's platoon's leading section was held up by a single German firing rifle grenades; rather than attempting to eliminate the threat, he decided, 'so alright well we can't continue this...way', and the obstacle was bypassed instead.[721] Later the same day, Partridge recalls:

[717] French, *Churchill's Army*, pp. 206-7; Allport, *Browned Off*, p. 235; Place, *Military Training*, p. 79; Marshall, *Men Against Fire*, pp. 44-58.
[718] Grossman, *On Killing*; Roberts, *Killer Butterflies*, pp. x, 30-3; King, *The Combat Soldier*, p. 129.
[719] The fact *not* firing was often a perfectly sensible tactic has been used to question the validity of Marshall's ratio of fire: see Engen, 'S.L.A. Marshall and the Ratio of Fire', pp. 43-5; Spiller, 'S.L.A. Marshall and the Ratio of Fire', p. 69; Smoler, 'The Secret of the Soldiers Who Didn't Shoot'.
[720] Tipping, 1, 34-36.
[721] Partridge, 1, 52-53.

> So there we all were [in Briquessard], and we sent a patrol out, and they heard Germans talking, and they came back and reported, they were about four hundred yards to our front, right front, and...of course you could have put in a fighting patrol, you could have gone in and shot at them and they would have shot back and people would have been killed and...been all messy, and that...was not the way I liked to fight well. I got all the two-inch mortars in the company, and under the direction of my own favourite platoon...mortar commander, they fired mortar shells, HE and mixed it in with a bit of smoke, just to confuse 'em, into the area where these Germans had been located. I think it was twenty-seven that came in, with their hands up, and one of us searched 'em. So it was bloodless, you see, so that's the best way, in my opinion, of fighting the battle.[722]

Colin Criddle describes how elsewhere during BLUECOAT, 'a German counteroffensive went right across our front […] We decided they were not going to bother us, so did nothing'.[723] During EPSOM, Spittles had 'my first experience of the Germans not knowing who we were, who waved to us as we went through, and we waved back, and carried on'[724]; the Northants saw no benefit to starting a fight. Most of the interviewees' accounts of combat are similar, supporting the impression that troops operated tentatively and avoided fighting where it was unnecessary to provoke the enemy or where he seemed to be too strong.

When contact was made, infantry combat seems to have essentially been a moral matter of persuading the enemy that his position was too hazardous to justify maintaining; eventually one side would break off the engagement (or surrender). Attacks generally ground to a halt because resistance appeared too strong, not because troops actually tested this by pressing forward into enemy fire. The fact that high casualties were sustained does not demonstrate that troops were particularly

[722] Partridge, 1, 56-57.
[723] Criddle, 1, 25.
[724] Spittles, 3, 16.

aggressive, as high losses could be inflicted by long-range and/or indirect fire even on troops operating cautiously; in reality, losses occurred *in spite of* soldiers taking every reasonable measure to avoid becoming casualties. Furthermore, where hazardous close-range combat did take place this usually had more to do with the battlefield conditions restricting manoeuvre, or a failure by the defenders to discourage the attacker from advancing, rather than either side particularly desiring to close with the enemy. As the infantry were often bound to operational planning and corps-level artillery timetables, their tactical freedom was frequently limited, and it was safer to 'lean into' the barrage than to take a more cautious approach, even though this would bring the troops into close contact with the enemy.[725]

Perceptions of the enemy's strength applied equally to defenders' decision-making. Tipping's recollections of being pinned down in a German ambush were quoted in Chapter Five; the conclusion of the story demonstrates such evasive behaviour:

> Well by then the other-, our other companies behind could hear the firing and knew we must be in trouble, so of course they came up, and...the Germans, although they hit you hard, they were ready, they got boltholes to...'cos they, soon as they knew there was too many troops coming up they made the boltholes and hopped it. So as quickly as it started, it stopped.[726]

There are several accounts of infantry happening upon positions which were prepared for defence but abandoned, or whose occupiers immediately surrendered without a fight.[727] It seems to have been typical in this way to induce the enemy to quit the area without being 'physically' defeated. Where this could not be done, the infantry could

[725] Place, *Military Training*, pp. 67-8, 79, 85; Buckley, *Monty's Men*, p. 118.
[726] Tipping, 1, 92.
[727] Dutton, 1, 20-22; Hitchcock, 1, 36; Tipping, 1, 77-79.

resort to loud and indirect weapons such as grenades, mortars and PIATs when threatened or pinned down to 'make it very uncomfortable'[728] for the enemy.

Here there are connections with the ways perception and psychology influence soldiers' conduct in battle. Accounts of using grenades provide a particularly clear example of how human psychology manifested itself in combat behaviour, and here it is instructive to return to Barry Freeman's account of hunting snipers:

> Very often...that we'd use grenades, but the unit that I was with, being an ordnance unit, we couldn't always get the ammunition we wanted, plenty of rifle ammunition, but things like grenades we couldn't often get, and very often, if there had been an attack somewhere and we were close in, we'd go and have a look and we could usually find grenades. And that's what we did, like in those little houses, it was...if we knew there was a sniper in the upstairs room and we weren't sure whether we'd got him or not, we'd do one of two things, if we...depending on if we had grenades or not. But we'd throw one into the downstairs, which would clear the ground floor, and then if we'd got enough grenades with us we'd go to the bottom of the stairs, and we'd pull the pin, and let the lever go, which starts the fuse going, and then throw it upstairs, so that they hadn't got time to pick it up and throw it back. We didn't do that very often because we hadn't got the grenades.[729]

The references here to grenades are intriguing since Freeman resists admitting to actually *shooting* the enemy; subjectively, he seems to find it easier to talk about using grenades. Yet this is not necessarily retrospective; during combat itself, the fact the user could avoid observing the effects of grenades made them easier to use than purposefully targeting and shooting an enemy with one's rifle, since arguably it was the grenade, rather than the thrower, which actually did the killing. Joanna Bourke presents testimony which cites this as one virtue of the grenade launchers commonly

[728] Partridge, 1, 70.
[729] Freeman, 2, 05-06.

used by American troops in the Vietnam War.[730] James Roberts too has argued that it was the distance established by the grenade between killer and victim which made them an attractive weapon.[731] Based on the assumption that most soldiers did not fight, he conjectures that the grenade became a weapon specially allocated to those 'within the battalion who had already volunteered to specialise in and execute interpersonal combat',[732] but it is equally plausible that grenades' characteristics as an indirect weapon made it easier for *all* soldiers to use.

This would explain the frequency of references to grenades in the veterans' testimonies. One example is an incident witnessed by Tom Dutton in which a prisoner was killed using a grenade;[733] another example is seen in Reg Spittles' account of the fighting in Cheux during EPSOM:

> It was pouring with rain, all day, thunderstorm, they'd knocked the water tower over so there was mud and water everywhere, and I do honestly think there was still as many Germans in Cheux as there were Scotchmen. They seemed to be everywhere. The town was a total shambles, the tanks were slipping, sliding over debris, there were Germans close enough to try to climb on your tank, you were chucking hand grenades out, we were using the Sten Gun for close quarters, and personally I finished up chucking out what we called phosphor grenades. Now phosphorous when it touches the human flesh will burn it all away and it cannot be...stopped. It's a terrible thing to do- use or do, and I thought, well these Germans are coming that close, they're almost reached the point of putting sticky bombs on the tanks, or climbing on the tanks, and I don't want them anywhere as near- as far away as possible, so I started throw out phosphor grenades. Of course that would make it as bad for the Scotchmen as the Germans, because if they got in on them, they would suffer the same, but I was only concerned with me, my tank, and my crew, so I had no respect for anyone else. It took

[730] Bourke, *Killing*, pp. 216-7. Fred H. Allison's interviewee Mike Nation discusses the use of grenade launchers, perhaps for similar reasons: Allison, 'Remembering a Vietnam War Firefight', p. 80.
[731] Roberts, *Killer Butterflies*, pp 75, 250.
[732] Ibid., p. 72.
[733] Dutton, 1, 90.

> us about...an hour, at least, to get through this small town. In training it would have been five minutes.[734]

Like the other interviewees, Spittles phrases his use of weapons in abstracted terms: throwing grenades but neglecting to specify their effects, 'using' the Sten rather than actively *shooting* Germans with it, and explaining the effects of phosphorous in hypothetical terms rather than something that he was using to actually inflict violence; he also, typically, justifies his actions in terms of self-preservation. This implied distance from killing is also true of Doug Mayman, another 'tankie' who, expanding upon his curt initial description (quoted in Chapter Six),[735] reports using grenades during his first time in action:

> Well, as you might expect, you remember it very clearly, the first time, because you think, 'God, that might have been me'. We came round a corner from some buildings and there was another tank, a German tank, clearly, pointing the opposite-, with its gun pointing in the opposite direction, slowly swivelling it round towards us. We managed to get our shot in first. I remember we used to carry, it was a rule, up the gunpoint-, up the gun you carried an HE, high-explosive shell, and then, if you met tanks, you had to change that for a...an armour-piercing shell, and I remember, all our training came to [n]owt because instead of changing the bloody shell for an armour-piercing shell we just shot the shell off at the tank, and then put the armour-piercing shell in and shot the tank, and it stopped the turret coming round towards us...the members in the tank got out and we lobbed a grenade at them and hopped it pretty quickly. So, you know, you remember everything, it was so close...but you got used to it after that.[736]

Again, violence is implied but not described, and justified as self-defence: 'that might have been me'.

[734] Spittles, 3, 16-19.
[735] Mayman, 1, 05-06.
[736] Mayman, 1, 06-07.

These extracts reflect the usual ways of narrating killing, yet it is questionable how far these references to grenades reflect retrospective subjectivity or narrative convenience, and how far they describe what actually occurred. It is somewhat surprising to hear accounts of tank crew using grenades, since the assumption is that the tank itself was their most effective weapon. However, allowance must be made for human behaviour and historical subjectivity. Soldiers likely found it easier to use grenades because in fast-paced and panicked situations such easily-operated weapons allowed them to take some positive action against the enemy with a minimum of personal exposure, time, effort, and responsibility for the consequences. This is evidenced by a later section of Eric Tipping's account of the fighting in Elst:

> We were given a task, our platoon was given a task, of clearing the houses...You can see on that...whasname of Elst, clear those houses. Well, we started to go, and soon as we got into open space we were fired on. It seemed as though there was [a] German in every room of these houses with [an] automatic weapon. Because every time you tried to move, you, you got, if you just put yourself out, *brrrr*! So we just couldn't move, you see. I mean, so the sergeant said, 'Right let's try lobbing some grenades at the windows to see if we can just distract them so as we can get...near to 'em and get in amongst 'em, like'. We tried that, no...one or two chaps got injured-, got wounded…[737]

Eventually, after the company commander was killed attempting to move forwards, the platoon received reinforcements, whose firepower finally allowed them to clear the enemy out of the village.

The Tactical Performance of British Troops

[737] Tipping, 1, 36-37.

Such matters of combat behaviour must be related to one of the key issues in the historiography of the British Army in the Second World War: the performance of the front-line troops, especially the infantry. The testimony essentially seems to support the less than glowing assessments outlined in Chapter Two.[738] The main concerns of the infantry were clearly quite prosaic—food, shelter, and kit—which itself is highly informative about the experience of the campaign.[739] Where training is concerned, getting fit and learning the technical and domestic skills required for living in the field are considered to have been more important than learning tactics, which are also largely absent from accounts of combat.[740] Officers and NCOs are naturally more cognizant of tactical matters, but still neglect to provide much information, and imply that their training fell somewhat short of the standard that would be required.[741] Evidence that other ranks in the infantry were given a picture of what their role would be in a larger tactical framework is only rarely to be found in the interviews.[742]

It is therefore possible to employ the testimony to buttress the interpretation that the British infantry underperformed tactically, devoid of initiative and dependent on directive control; both because rankers imply that they were largely impotent and passive, and officers and NCOs describe micromanaging their men. For instance, Robert Purver describes how during the fighting in Tripsrath, having organised 'my boys who I'd put in a defensive position all round the house', he personally provided

[738] Beevor, *D-Day*, pp. 142, 264; D'Este, *Decision in Normandy*, p. 284; Ellis, *Brute Force*, p. 382; Hastings, *Overlord*, pp. 211, 371; Fraser, *And We Shall Shock Them*, p. 397.
[739] Partridge, 1, 28; Hutchinson, 3, 14-15, 62-63; Hitchcock, 1, 37-38; Majendie, 1, 32-33; Tipping, 1, 79-80; Dutton, 1, 16, 50; Purver, 2, 33, 38-40; Howson, 1, 47-49; Young, 1, 63; Eglington, 1, 32.
[740] Spittles, 2, 16-20; Procter, 1, 04; Young, 1, 03-05; Cox, 1, 04, 21; Purver, 1, 01-02; Dimarco, 1, 00-02; Edwardes, 1, 04-05; Hunt, 1, 01, 15.
[741] Cox, 1, 19-20; Majendie, 1, 78-79, 81; Partridge, 1, 03-04.
[742] Hitchcock, 1, 38-39; Majendie, 1, 83-84.

covering fire using the Bren gun to another platoon who were advancing, and on being wounded, 'I nominated one of the blokes to take over and told him what was going on', which invites the question: what would have occurred had Purver been killed instead?[743]

There are, however, reasons to potentially moderate such criticism. There are several possible reasons interviewees may neglect to discuss tactics: because they made no special effort to remember them; because they do not consider it a particularly interesting subject for discussion; because they were not questioned in the right way; or because they prefer not to discuss occasions where they were face-to-face with the enemy. Personal accounts tend to downplay individual agency, giving historians an impression that British soldiers performed poorly at an individual level. Yet none of these factors provides positive evidence that troops were tactically inept.

Another important factor is the dichotomy which existed in British doctrine between tightly orchestrated set-piece attacks, which 'left little room for traditional platoon and section tactics', and those in which the infantry had the freedom to employ their own firepower, initiative and the new battle drill techniques.[744] Generally the former loom larger in the testimony because they represent the major engagements which formed watersheds in veterans' war experiences; accounts provide little in the way of tactical analysis, and participants give the impression that they were simply swept up by events. However, the latter allow veterans to analyse their decision-making and behaviour in greater depth. For this reason, the quality of British fieldcraft and

[743] Purver, 2, 12.
[744] Copp, *Fields of Fire*, p. 27; Place, *Military Training*, pp. 67-8, 76.

patrolling skills is better supported.[745] Alan Hitchcock opines, 'When it came down to...any rough stuff, then I think we were better in a way than the Germans. They were more static. Very very static sometimes. […] When you got through them they used to fold away a bit.'[746] Nonetheless, it does seem probable that if the average infantryman had enjoyed good knowledge of the tactical situation and the way the various parts of his unit worked together in combat, and had routinely carried out standard tactics designed to outmanoeuvre and kill the enemy, these would be discussed more extensively.

It is important not to overstate the implications of this point. A dependence on the tactic of intimidation should not be confused with an absence of tactics entirely; the testimony merely brings into question the practical relevance of the neat tactical drills found in the training manuals. An inability to enact complex small-unit tactics on the chaotic and confusing modern battlefield was likely the norm rather than the exception for all sides, and should not necessarily be seen as evidencing any wider deficiencies in motivation or cohesion among British forces. It is tempting to view hesitancy among front-line troops, and their preference for 'indirect' methods of intimidation, as proof that the British Army's operations were indeed hindered by their poor performance, as historians such as Stephen A Hart, John Ellis and Carlo D'Este have argued.[747] However, this would be an interpretation the evidence marshalled here cannot sustain. It would require evidence that the British were abnormal in their caution, whereas it appears that the Germans (and likely the Americans too) showed an equal dislike of

[745] Ibid., pp. 38-9; Kite, *Stout Hearts*, p. 72; Jary, *18 Platoon*, p. 17.
[746] Hitchcock, 1, 44.
[747] Hart, *Colossal Cracks*; Ellis, *Brute Force*; D'Este, *Decision in Normandy*.

confrontation. Furthermore, it is by no means apparent that troops proved any less effective or slower to win ground even if they preferred to overawe the enemy to force his withdrawal rather than confront and kill him. Indeed, the interviewees' units were frequently successful on the offense. Therefore, it is not inconceivable that a high operational tempo could be maintained provided the attacking troops were able to overawe the enemy effectively enough. This is a question of the relationship between front-line tactics and broader operational effectiveness which is outside the scope of this thesis.

What is clear is that the veterans' testimony can justify a reassessment of combat at the very lowest levels, suggesting that mechanistic tactics as commonly visualised, not least in the training manuals, were of little practical relevance, and an indirect approach based on forbearance in which success or failure was decided by an essentially psychological contest between the two sides was much more common.

Tactical Agency in Accounts of Tank Combat

Also evident is a distinction between accounts from infantrymen and tank crews in terms of their implied tactical agency. It is striking that unlike infantrymen, tank veterans proffer multiple coherent and well-explained combat accounts.[748] They are also more likely to contextualise their actions in relation to other units and sub-units. Often the difference is merely that tank crew describe what they did, whereas infantry describe what was done to them; nonetheless, the difference is clear and potentially

[748] Ekins, 1, 29-35; Spittles, 1, 133-135; 3, 16-62; 4, 00-04; Mayman, 1, 05-07, 19-24; Hammerton, 1, 52-58, 121-122; Tout, 2, 54-63.

significant, and there are several possible reasons. Interviewees may assume that tank combat makes for a more interesting subject than infantry combat, given the image of the Second World War as a war of machines.[749] Tank crewmen were likely to be technically-minded individuals interested in identifying and explaining procedures. This tendency was encouraged by wartime training and experience, as tank combat was generally a more technical business than infantry work.[750] Furthermore, it may represent that tank crews felt a higher degree of control and agency than the infantry. Having some responsibility for reading and reacting to the tactical situation would cause individuals to recall and discuss such things more easily in interview (in the same way that officers' testimony reflects their different concerns in battle compared with other ranks). In fact, all of these factors probably play a part in making crews' recollections of doctrine and tactics particularly detailed and informative.

The latter suggestion would seem to contrast with the historiography, however. Tanks have generally been seen as permitting commanders to maintain particularly high levels of 'grip', as officers and NCOs 'had much greater control over the manner in which their tanks and troops fought any given action', leading to higher levels of aggression and *élan* among the armour.[751] The concerns of crewmen were seemingly immaterial, in contrast to infantry combat which is assumed to have demanded higher levels of individual initiative.[752] Place suggests that 'Such evidence as is available suggests that only those earmarked for command were actually conscious of receiving tactical instruction', but nonetheless 'provided each man played his part properly the

[749] Ellis, 'Reflections on the Sharp End of War', in Addison and Calder (eds.), *Time to Kill*, p. 15;
[750] Place, *Military Training*, pp. 80, 85.
[751] Buckley, *British Armour*, p. 197.
[752] Place, *Military Training*, p. 82.

tank could operate effectively even if some of them failed to see the jigsaw beyond their own modest piece'.[753]

However, the testimony represents additional evidence which can paint a more complex picture, again by taking account of subjective human behaviour. It indicates that it was not the case that tank commanders maintained a tight grip while crewmen were automata, free of any tactical nous, who simply obeyed the commander's orders. Ekins, for example, remembers his crew operating largely by consensus:

> Luckily the crew that I got to, with, were excellent. We, within a very short time we were like a family, you know, that's the only way you can survive, I mean you, you relied on each other for your life, and…also…rank and that was completely forgotten, and you didn't, you didn't just obey orders blindly, I mean in fact I soon realised that after we got to Normandy, you didn't take too much notice of what they told you to do […] You eventually worked on a, a consensus. I mean we got a, we were in the sergeant tank, there were officer tanks, sergeant tank, usually a corporal tank and a lan— perhaps a lance corporal tank, in the four, you know, and my tank was the sergeant's tank so we got a sergeant, but I mean, we called him Hog, and…if we wanted to do anything it was a consensus with the four of us, five of us decided what were gonna do, you know…Broadly, we didn't disobey orders, if we were told we were gonna go to a village we went, but if they said 'go round here, go round there', we went where we…where we knew were best, you know, because we knew better than they did.[754]

This should not be particularly surprising. Tank combat facilitated—even demanded—a certain degree of delegation precisely because the crew were confined within the vehicle; the commander could allow the driver to drive, the gunner to engage targets, and the loader/operator to maintain communications, without micromanaging any of these tasks, because there was little opportunity for individuals to abscond. The

[753] Ibid., pp. 82-3; Buckley, *British Armour*, p. 82.
[754] Ekins, 1, 44-46.

physical closeness of crews, and the correspondingly intimate inter-rank relations,[755] also helped to facilitate the delegation of responsibility. By comparison the infantry had more opportunity to disperse; rather than facilitating flexibility this forced officers to exert more grip and micromanage extensively to ensure the unit retained its cohesion.

Furthermore, the interviews indicate that a perception existed among tank crews that they enjoyed substantial tactical influence, especially after they had gained some battle experience. Even though it was not technically necessary for those other than tank commanders to understand the tactical situation, and if crews' 'knowledge of what was happening outside was severely restricted',[756] the veterans maintain that quite a high level of tactical knowledge existed at all levels. Partly this was because tanks were fitted with radios, allowing information to be communicated continuously and instantaneously in a way which was impossible for the infantry. Ken Tout of the 1st Northamptonshire Yeomanry places great stress on the way tank crews enjoyed a 'running commentary' of the action: 'Thanks to the efficiency of tank wireless the most humble tank crew member could eavesdrop on battles near and not so near. The infantry were much more confined to their slit trench and narrow field of fire'. [757] This depended on the precise system employed; the 1st Northamptonshire Yeomanry used a 'total regimental net', whereby every tank operated on the same frequency, which allowed anyone to follow the wider progress of the battle. Reg Spittles was probably denied the same level of information from the wireless because the 2nd

[755] Buckley, *British Armour*, p. 184; Ekins, 1, 54-55.
[756] Place, *Military Training*, p. 82.
[757] Tout, 2, 40-41; 57; 59; Tout, *A Fine Night for Tanks*, pp. 1-2, 12, 88. See also Ellis, *The Sharp End*, p. 151.

Northamptonshire Yeomanry made use of the more usual 'squadron net' system, in which the 'A' wireless set was used for communication within squadrons and the separate 'B' set for communication with regimental HQ, with the disadvantage that it was more difficult for regimental commanders to follow the progress of the battle if hard-pressed squadron commanders were not frequently passing back information.[758]

Spittles was, however, privy to the other method of transmitting tactical information, daily conferences:

> ...you start the day off by having a tank commanders' conference, at which you get information relating to you and your position and your friends', and as much information as is known about the enemy and their positions, which are all marked- you mark on your board […] so, when you've had your conference, you've got all this information about your people and their people...[759]

Robert Ford also recalls, 'there'd always be a good O Group, you'd be well informed normally...very- well what intelligence there was about German positions...'.[760] Furthermore, this information made its way down to the very lowest levels of command. From Tout's account, we learn that:

> ...you'd got the map, you'd seen a map...one of the things that happened, which was very important, was that when we went into action, before every action the commander would assemble the crew, with the map, and tell us exactly what we were intended to do, so if the commander was killed, or wounded, as frequently happened, and somebody else took charge, he knew what was...meant to happen, and if he was wounded...lost, there would be somebody on the tank who survived, even if it's only the driver, he knew where we were and what we were supposed to be doing, he could drive the tank...into safety. So everybody on the crew knew exactly where we were...on that map and would know that to the left we had 1 Troop and 4 Troop, and so on, and

[758] Tout, *A Fine Night for Tanks*, p. 150. Spittles provides a detailed description of radio procedures: see 3, 06-11.
[759] Spittles, 3, 05.
[760] Ford, 3, 47.

> to the right we had A Squadron, and over there we had 144-...we knew all this as basic. So the tank crew was extremely well informed, because you would find at times you got out and talked to the infantry lieutenant, and he had no idea of the detail that you'd been given. He would be told eventually but at that point we might know more than he knew down on the ground.[761]

Tout suggests that even the lowliest armoured trooper was better informed about the tactical situation than many infantry officers. Here it is possible to illustrate the way individual subjectivity can be accounted for to reach conclusions about the past. Tout is broadly positive about the Army's performance; his former comrade Joe Ekins is much more critical. However, on the point of tactical intelligence, there is telling concurrence between Tout's positively-slanted account and Ekins' more negative one. Ekins states that:

> ...we didn't know what were happening at all...Somebody wrote and asked me what sort of...[4] information did we get before an attack? And I mean I wrote back and said the only information we got were that the...troop sergeant come out and said 'We're starting and nine o'clock and we're going here', you know, and...so we didn't know anything about it...[762]

Ekins' main point here is to complain that the average soldier knew little about the larger operations he was involved in, but it is obviously not realistic to have expected yeomanry troopers to have been informed about every facet of corps-level planning; this extract in fact provides further evidence of the ubiquity of pre-battle briefings. The fact that Ekins complains that this level of knowledge was insufficient, whereas Tout presents it more positively, is immaterial to the key piece of evidence here: that tank crews down to the level of private soldier were regularly and thoroughly briefed

[761] Tout, 2, 60-61.
[762] Ekins, 1, 22.

on their role in operations in a way which compares very favourably with popular stereotypes of British armour in Normandy as being tactically unskilled and devoid of initiative.

The testimony does not provide sufficient grounds to dispute the existing literature on tank combat. John Buckley, among others, is correct to argue that 'tank crew endured a particular tension during battle, that of being detached from their surroundings. Unlike infantrymen, most tank crews were rarely aware of the ebb and flow of battle…Even commanders could feel confused and swept up in the chaos of the battlefield, unsure as to who was who, and crewmen inside had only a vague notion of how the battle was progressing, gleaning snippets of information from the radio of by deciphering the battle noises around them.'[763] However, if tank crews did suffer from limited situational awareness, they evidently did not *feel* this was the case, and their encounters with the apparently clueless infantry only confirmed their view that they were much better-informed about the situation thanks to the continuous distribution of information to all ranks via radio.

There therefore appears to be a mismatch between the reality of tank combat and how it was perceived by participants; that is, perhaps tank crews regarded themselves as more tactically aware and able to exert greater control over the battle than they actually were. If this is the case, it would go some way to explaining why morale and aggression among armoured units remained high despite the fact that crews were forced to put themselves in harm's way, in many cases during poorly supported attacks

[763] Buckley, *British Armour*, p. 194; Allport, *Browned Off*, p. 222; Place, *Military Training*, p. 82; Ellis, *The Sharp End*, pp. 133-5.

which virtually guaranteed high tank losses.[764] S.L.A. Marshall perceptively argued, as more recently has David French, that communication of knowledge about the tactical situation was essential for the maintenance of morale.[765] It may be that tank crews felt genuinely confident in their ability to act with aggression, rather than merely behaving as such because they were held in tight grip by commanders. Certainly, the way tank crew discuss being aware of the wider events of the battlefield and imply an ability to influence them contrasts very strongly with the infantrymen's perspective in which individuals were at the mercy of events and 'your...horizon is the rim of your steel helmet'.[766] Assessing the literature from tank crewmen therefore produces two main findings: subjective perceptions of battlefield performance may have diverged quite significantly from the practical reality; and, alongside the relatively low casualty rates and the greater grip and primary group cohesion achievable in the close confines of tanks,[767] the confidence of the crews in their own tactical ability was likely an important factor in the maintenance of morale in armoured units.

Assessing Doctrine Using Veterans' Testimony

It has been seen that when in contact with the enemy front-line troops usually abandoned tactical drills and attempted to dislodge the enemy through intimidation. Yet a great deal of soldiers' time was not spent face-to-face with the enemy, and standard procedures must have existed for a broad variety of purposes both in and out of combat, determining, for example, how units would form up before launching

[764] Buckley, *British Armour*, pp. 203, 207-8.
[765] Marshall, *Men Against Fire*, pp. 85-99, 123-137; French, '"Tommy is no Soldier"', p. 168.
[766] Majendie, 1, 14-15.
[767] Buckley, *British Armour*, pp. 197, 203.

an attack, or the formation a patrol would take up. Although oral evidence can successfully reveal the general perceptual and cultural dimensions of soldiers' battlefield conduct, such tactical procedures are quite difficult to illuminate using oral testimony.

It is important to keep in mind that oral history essentially provides the worm's-eye view, whereas many doctrinal issues really concern operational-level planning—for example, a major debate in 21st Army Group was over how infantry and armoured units should be echeloned during assaults.[768] The literature, not least that seeking to cast a more positive light on the British Army's performance, tends to deal with doctrine as enacted at the level of battalions, brigades and divisions, whose actions are well-recorded in the documentary material.[769] At that level, particularly during the set-piece operations where any operational doctrine was most clearly enacted, the small-unit tactics to be employed by the attacking troops were often immaterial; Place suggests that 'heavy reliance upon extraneous fire-power rendered infantry minor tactics superfluous, theoretically at least, for much of the duration of an engagement' (though the armour had more freedom).[770]

It is unsurprising that the troops on the ground had little idea of the larger machine in which they were only a tiny cog. Impressions of such must be approached with a great deal of caution, as they often represent second-hand information gleaned long

[768] Place, *Military Training*, pp. 147-52; Buckley, *British Armour*, pp. 78-81; Buckley, *Monty's Men*, p. 130.
[769] Buckley, *Monty's Men*; Forrester, *Monty's Functional Doctrine*; French, *Churchill's Army*, pp. 240-73; Patrick Rose, 'Allies at War: British and US Army Command Culture in the Italian Campaign, 1943-1944', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 36/1 (2013), pp. 42-75.
[770] Place, *Military Training*, pp. 67-8, 76, 79, 85.

after the event, rather than contemporaneous experience. It is highly unlikely, while involved in reducing the Breskens Pocket, that Ian Hammerton was aware what the other components of 79th Armoured Division were doing at various places around Walcheren, Antwerp and the Scheldt Estuary; or that Reg Spittles predicted the appearance of the Falaise Gap.[771] As Spittles himself acknowledges, 'Monty knows how it affects that division, that division, that division, there's a map, and we'll send them there and them there, that's alright. But when it comes down to me, I'm interested in me, and how that's gonna affect me.'[772] In this sense the testimony of front-line troops is a poor source for illuminating traditional doctrinal debates. The success or failure of minor tactical actions could clearly have important ramifications on higher operations, but eyewitness testimony cannot easily tell us what they were. Therefore, it is more realistic to envision veterans' testimony as providing additional, lower level insight to supplement the literature on operational-level doctrine.

Even at the lowest levels, it seems that soldiers had limited awareness they were involved in carrying out any tactical procedures, making it difficult for them to describe them fully. The front-line soldier who is the subject of the keenest interest will have much to say about what he witnessed and felt, but is rarely in a position to comment on what occurred outside his relatively blinkered field of view. Within this perceptual bubble, moreover, the veteran has no way of evaluating whether his experience was normal and unremarkable or exceptional and noteworthy, and for this reason much of interest presumably goes unsaid. The historian is left with mere snippets of

[771] Hammerton, 1, 99-100; Spittles, 5, 54-56. See also Gregg, 2, 58-60; Young, 1, 62-63; Tipping, 1, 09-15.
[772] Spittles, 3, 71-72.

information, which are difficult to piece together to reconstruct an impression of tactical procedures. Through judicious and focussed questioning it may be possible to elicit more extensive testimony,[773] but this requires foreknowledge of the wartime situation dependent mainly on official documentary sources. Factors accessible only through first-hand experience and absent from the documentary record may remain hidden because interviewees do not know such information is noteworthy and interviewers do not know to ask for it. Ironically, then, the mystery of what happens in combat might preclude useful comment by the very people who *are* in a position to know.

Of course, the situation is more complicated and in some respects more positive than this. Respondents reveal a great deal indirectly and unintentionally which an attentive analyst can pick up on, military theory and official reports can provide clues to guide questioning, and veterans' own research can alert them of aspects of their experience which might interest an interviewer. Though the 'unknowability' of battle remains something of a cliché, the large part of what happens in battle probably is known, to the extent that any historical event can be known. Yet it remains the case that veterans can rarely comment extensively on matters of doctrine and tactical procedure, compared with matters more immediate to their experience.

The snippets they provide are most valuable in highlighting the centrality of human perception and behaviour to events on the battlefield. The testimony contains much which confounds popular assumptions about warfare and can deepen understanding

[773] John Buckley has had some success eliciting descriptions of armoured tactics such as 'snake patrol': Buckley, *British Armour*, pp. 95-6.

about what military operations looked like at the lowest levels. Infantry would rarely come face-to-face with the enemy, invariably taking cover and using whatever means necessary to persuade the enemy to withdraw, rather than directly attempting to kill him; combat was rarely the zero-sum game implied by high aggregate casualty figures and portrayed in war films. Tank crews found a degree of security in their armour plate and radios, and the cohesion and communal decision-making these facilitated. Such subjective factors help to explain the conduct of both arms throughout the campaign, and oral history analysed according to a 'tactical snippeting' approach therefore appears to provide a plausible alternative to the traditional study of small-unit tactics thorough training manuals which, it seems, are a poor guide to real-world practice.

Summary: Applying the Testimony

The campaign is remembered according to various themes, common to interviewees and therefore presumably common to their wartime experiences. This overview of the historical worth of the testimony when exploring combat experience, morale and doctrine clearly shows that its use demands a complex juggling of practical, psychological, cultural and historically- and retrospectively subjective factors. Rarely can a particular judgement be conclusively deemed either factual or subjective; as the cultural circuit implies, one should expect drawing this distinction to be difficult (nor is oral testimony notably more ambiguous in this respect than memoir or, indeed, many archival documents). There is, however, undoubtedly a great deal of genuine information about the experiences and conduct of British soldiers in the 1944-5 campaign to be derived from the testimony. This can be done by considering the likely

ways subjectivity might have distorted an account, and accounting for this effect; or by contrasting two or more accounts and assessing commonalities which exist in spite of different subjective biases. The complexity of interpreting veterans' testimony is ultimately a clear indication of the complexity of human perception and behaviour and, indeed, of military history itself.

Conclusion

This thesis has sought to assess the particular features and historical usefulness of veterans' oral testimony, using the Second World War as a case study of issues relevant throughout modern military history. The relation of oral history to military history has remained neglected and under-theorised by academics, despite the great interest in personal narratives of war and the time and resources which have been directed towards amassing oral histories of veterans. Military historians writing for both academic and popular audiences have made ample use of oral evidence without paying much attention to its particularities, either treating it as an uncomplicated source of information or, more commonly, showing sensible caution but little expertise, and relegating it to an inferior status compared with supposedly more reliable documents. Oral historians have since the 1970s dealt convincingly with many of the criticisms directed at their material, staunchly defending the principle that those who lived through history have a part to play in recording it. However, over time a deeper understanding of subjectivity has led it to become the major concern of scholars, whose work more often takes the relativist form of memory studies, dealing with the role of history in the identities and beliefs of those living in the present, rather than oral history as it was originally envisioned, to contribute to the understanding of the past in its own terms. Oral historians' work on veterans has generally shown far more concern with elaborating individual stories and identities, particularly those bound up with trauma, than shedding light on military events. This study contends that up-to-date analytical methods drawn from oral history can be fruitfully applied to more traditional research goals. In bridging the methodological divide between military

history and oral history in a way which has not otherwise been attempted, this study makes an original contribution to the field.

While oral sources should be approached critically, with an understanding of the specialised methodology they demand, it is evident that they are not fundamentally more or less problematic than any other type of source; written sources can also be significantly affected by subjective bias. Criticism of oral history tends to fixate on the fact—entirely correct—that memory of dates, times, names and places tends to be unreliable. But one does not conduct interviews to learn such facts, but rather about attitudes and emotions, routine procedures, and particularly impactful events, which are remembered well. There can be little doubt that in terms of this sort of information oral testimony is reliable, meaning consistent over time. Ample research demonstrates that memory of important life events does not decline significantly over time in healthy individuals.[774] It is a rare interviewee who will change their story in any significant way, and most provide a rehearsed account which covers the same issues in the same order with extraordinary consistency, often down to the use of particular phrases.

The facts that the Second World War is among the best-known of all historical events, and war stories are a narrative genre valued in British society, encourage this process of rehearsal. All respondents should be expected retrospectively to contextualise experiences to some extent—Ken Tout states that, 'It was something that you assembled in your mind afterwards'[775]—and, indeed, this meaning-making is part of what makes oral testimony useful. Although this can result in stilted accounts in the

[774] Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 90; Schacter, *Searching For Memory*, p. 291.
[775] Tout, 2, 59; Allison, 'Remembering a Vietnam War Firefight', pp. 81-2.

uncommon cases where popular and media attention produces 'professional recollectors',[776] it is beneficial more often than not, yielding testimony which is coherent, reflective, and relevant to the historical issues and to the meaning the veteran invests in the episode they are describing.[777]

It is also important, on this point, to note that a rambling and confusing manner of narration is no indication of unreliability or forgetfulness. Some interviewees provide accounts which are easy to follow but contain little useful information; others accounts which are difficult to follow but contain a great deal of valuable information and perceptive comment. A distinction between memory and narrative coherence is a new and important consideration when considering the testimony of elderly veterans.

The rest of the thesis has demonstrated the validity of the testimony, its level of agreement with other sources, and the connected issue of usefulness, how well it illuminates specifically those issues which are of historical interest. The testimony can clearly prove informative on a wide range of relevant issues. As a preliminary to considering historical interpretation, the first half of the thesis dealt with the stuff of memory studies—matters of identity, popular memory, and trauma—which influence retrospective remembering and narration according to the theory of composure: 'In one sense we compose or construct memories using the public languages and meanings of our culture. In another sense we compose memories that help us to feel

[776] Holmes, *Tommy*, p. xxiii; Strachan, 'Into History', pp. 4-5.
[777] Wallace, '"Professional Recollectors", Rehearsed Memory and its Uses', pp. 55-66.

relatively comfortable with our lives and identities, that give us a feeling of composure.'[778]

The popular memory of the British Army in the Second World War is broadly positive but, at the same time, does not provide a completely unproblematic framework for oral history. Factors ranging from the myth of the civilianised 'People's War',[779] the memory of D-Day as the last gasp of the British Empire,[780] historical assessments which have questioned the skill and fighting spirit of British soldiers,[781] post-Vietnam discourses of trauma and veterancy,[782] and perhaps a typically British reluctance to 'blow one's own trumpet', all provide reasons for veterans to downplay their individual agency and assume the role of passive spectators or victims of events. Veterans generally accede to the received wisdom in this regard, as this does not fundamentally threaten their narratives: 'an official or dominant legend works not by excluding contradictory versions but by representing them in ways that fit the legend and flatten out the contradictions.'[783] The exception is that the interviewees are silent on the 'all in it together' rhetoric of the People's War which evokes the image of a united wartime nation. Such sentiments are expressed only prior to enlistment, while civilians (communications with which were in reality a vitally important element in soldiers' morale) are excluded from the story in order to emphasise that the Army experience

[778] Thomson, *Anzac Memories*, p. 8.
[779] Dawson and West, 'The Popular Memory of World War II', in Hurd (ed.), *National Fictions*, pp. 8-13; Connelly, *We Can Take It!*; Peniston-Bird, 'Patriotism and the 'People's War'', pp. 69-80.
[780] Edwards, 'D-Day in British Memory', in Dolski, Edwards and Buckley (eds.), *D-Day in History and Memory*.
[781] D'Este, *Decision in Normandy*, p. 284; Max Hastings, *Overlord: D-Day and the Battle for Normandy 1944* (London, 1984), pp. 211, 371; Antony Beevor, *D-Day: The Battle for Normandy* (London, 2009), pp. 142, 264; Ellis, *Brute Force*, pp. 382.
[782] Jones and Wessely, *Shell Shock to PTSD*, pp. 128, 138, 173, 184; Bracken, 'Post-Modernity and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder', pp. 733-743.
[783] Thomson, *Anzac Memories*, p. 12.

was distinct from that of the majority of the nation. The veterans therefore subtly question and undermine one of the central tenets of the British popular myth of the Second World War.

As this case demonstrates, the chief lesson from assessing popular memory is not that it constrains and suppresses all that disputes the dominant interpretation, but that it allows substantial latitude for participants to tell their stories in the way they see fit. It can therefore be seen that the particular personal circumstances, experiences, background, and outlook of each veteran were just as important as popular memory in determining the interpretation he put forth. These range from the outraged stance of the 'moral witnesses'[784] and those who attempted to do some good in trying circumstances, to those who view the war as a time they personally or collectively demonstrated skill and achieved success, to narratives like those of non-combatants which are conflicted and multifaceted. The veterans clearly do not provide one standard interpretation dictated by the official or dominant memory. Popular memory should be seen as providing important frameworks for remembering, especially by establishing common understanding between the speaker and his audience, but it is nonetheless possible for interviewees to provide highly idiosyncratic interpretations ranging from positive to negative and drawing on a great range of divergent personal experiences and outlooks. As much as the popular memory shapes the testimony, the veterans also choose which aspects to make use of and which to disregard. Popular memory is ultimately founded on individual experiences and points of view, surviving only as long as it provides an interpretation which aligns sufficiently closely with the

[784] Winter, *Remembering War*, pp. 238-9.

beliefs of participants, and always open to contestation. Personal subjectivity is at least as important an influence on the oral testimony. Anna Green is correct to insist that 'Human subjectivity is more active, engaged, and critical than contemporary theory permits. We must keep space for the resistant, curious, rebellious, thoughtful, purposeful human subject'.[785]

Another important consideration is trauma. The general assumption is that the chances of eliciting an honest account of a traumatic event are highly dubious. In a popular context veterans are pictured as silent, brooding and invariably suffering from PTSD;[786] in an academic context, scholars approach trauma through a 'discourse of the unrepresentable'.[787] The testimony directly disputes such notions, as the veterans recount violent deaths and woundings of close friends and children, suffering from or personally inflicting friendly fire, and numerous instances of mortal danger to their person. Lynn Abrams argues that traumatic experiences can be 'far more difficult to translate into narrative and may be impossible to be narrated because they cannot be made sense of and then wrapped up in neat discursive structures like stories'.[788] However, the testimony makes evident that for Second World War veterans trauma *can* routinely be made sense of through narrative, most obviously because disturbing war stories make good tales which attract positive attention and are validated by popular discourses of war. In certain cases, like that of Ray Gordon, the entire interview becomes an exercise in sharing trauma, the very opposite of repression.

[785] Green, 'Can Memory be Collective?', in Ritchie (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, p. 108.
[786] Jones and Wessely, *Shell Shock to PTSD*, p. 184.
[787] James Berger, 'Trauma and Literary Theory', *Contemporary Literature*, 38/3 (1997), p. 573, quoted in Dodd, 'Childhood "Trauma"', pp. 39-40.
[788] Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 121.

Accounts of trauma are not, of course, completely unalloyed; but they do not appear appreciably less genuine than any other piece of testimony. Respondents give their honest recollections, albeit refracted through the lens of popular discourse, which is all that can be expected of any oral history.

This is not to dispute the reality of war trauma. Undoubtedly many veterans cannot articulate their disturbing experiences, though there is no real way to measure what proportion. However, what is important for the purposes of oral history (whose practitioners cannot realistically attempt to interview all but a fraction of veterans in any case) is that there are a substantial number who *do* speak. As oral history informants are self-selecting, interviewees are likely to be those who are positively enthusiastic to do so. This appears to bring the representativeness of veterans' oral history into question, but if interviewees are likely to be more psychologically resilient than average, this does not mean their experiences are similarly exceptional: 'even though individuals may not be representative, their stories might be'.[789]

For these men, the violent and disturbing aspects are some of the most important, because they grant their accounts an air of authenticity and validate their identities as 'real' soldiers. It is for the same reasons that veterans so often relate stories of 'near misses', using space to emphasise and perhaps exaggerate their proximity to danger. Among those veterans who are happy to talk, it may in fact be those who lack sufficiently violent and disturbing war stories who have most trouble narrating their

[789] Dodd, 'Small Fish, Big Pond', in Tumblety (ed.), *Memory and History*, p. 40.

wars in a way a modern audience, expecting to hear of hardship, loss and trauma, will appreciate—as the few non-combatants interviewed for this study demonstrate.

There is one important exception to the description of violence, however: the veterans consistently avoid acknowledging any personal participation in killing. Many probably were never in such a position, due to the highly dispersed nature of modern warfare. However, this is highly unlikely to have applied to all thirty-three. Presumably, the taboo against killing prevents it being discussed. This may be thought unusual, since most people know it is soldiers' business to kill; in fact, this knowledge may allow the fact of killing to safely be left unsaid. Yet at the same time, the characterisation of soldiers as victims, a status incompatible with also being a perpetrator of violence, provides a plausible explanation for the silence on killing. While emphasising witnessing violence can strengthen veteran identity, acknowledging the infliction of violence would tend to undermine it.

Having assessed the various subjective factors which influence the veterans' testimony, it is possible to move on to consider how the testimony can illuminate historical debates about the British Army in the Second World War. For the most part, this analysis produced little that was unexpected. This is no grounds for criticism, however; it should not be surprising that the interviews concur with the substantial existing research which has been done on the Second World War. This demonstrates the validity of oral evidence. Had the testimony diverged significantly from the historiography, it would have been a knotty problem to explain how this could be so; the usefulness of the testimony would be in doubt, as the existing literature could hardly be disputed on the basis of just thirty-three interviews. However, there is no

great divergence: the oral testimony concurs with the documentary record and the memoirs because the same events have informed each type of source, and even though each has a different focus, information has been passed down through these various channels which historians can reconcile to produce broadly applicable interpretations.[790] In other words, personal accounts sit alongside, but by and large do not dispute, the documentary record. It would be inaccurate to suggest that oral history can rewrite history by revealing a hidden 'truth'. Although the increased use of personal sources has arguably constituted something of a revolution in historical method, in terms of interpretation they usually broaden and complexify, rather than overturn, existing historical understandings.

It follows that oral history can potentially be valuable in a recovery role when researching less well-known conflicts, and where official documentary material is lacking. Although veterans' accounts will necessarily have a more specific personal focus than official documents, they are unlikely to diverge significantly in the broad interpretation they offer, so there is good reason to believe they can provide worthwhile information in the absence of other sources.

This is not to suggest that an interpretation consistently supported by a broad reading of the sources is necessarily a simple and straightforward one; in fact, the 1944-5 campaign was evidently a highly inconsistent and often contradictory experience, as the testimony makes abundantly clear. Yet one of the most interesting findings is the

[790] It should be noted that whatever debates over the Second World War remain unresolved, these pale into insignificance compared with the near-unanimous agreement on the basic facts and chronology, on which all credible researchers concur. This is often not the case in those peripheral areas of historical research in which oral history is most commonly employed.

way broad patterns in experience can emerge quite separately from recollections of specific events. In the clearest instance, the interviewees remember the Normandy campaign as a period of immobility, frustration, danger and discomfort; the subsequent breakout and pursuit across France and Belgium is described quite differently, as a period of movement and optimism. Furthermore, this distinction is evidenced not just by the interviewees' statements to that effect but by the very manner in which the two periods are narrated; Normandy is described as a monotonous period in which the specifics of time and place counted for little; in the breakout, by contrast, dates and locations become meaningful, and engagements become distinguishable in a way which was theretofore much more difficult. In this way the very manner of narrating the story seems to reflect the way the two periods were experienced at the time.[791]

Combat experience is generally associated by the interviewees with confusion and chaos, which robbed participants of a sense of agency. In Stephen Bull's words, 'the idea that infantry more often had things done to them, rather than inflicting harm themselves, would appear valid'.[792] Soldiers were faced with threats they could not confront, often from their own side as much as the enemy, and this accounts for the fact that the opposition is dehumanised and spoken of in the way of a natural phenomenon. The only exception is accounts of being wounded, as it seems attractive in these cases to portray oneself as a sporting loser in a contest against a skilful opponent, rather than the victim of blind luck. In spite of the suggestions of some

[791] Rosenthal, 'German War Memories', pp. 34-41.
[792] Bull, *Infantry Tactics*, p. ix.

researchers[793] the opposite circumstance does not apply, as killing is not generally discussed. Aside from this (admittedly significant) omission, it seems highly likely the testimony reflects the disorientating reality of battle experience.

The testimony also highlights the myriad factors which influenced morale, particularly the reassurance provided by ample logistical support, an effective welfare system and good inter-rank relations; the testimony suggests the role played by NCOs requires more attention. Ultimately the testimony illustrates how 'Morale appears to be multidimensional',[794] and suggests that morale in the British Army, although it came under significant strain, ultimately held up well.

Assessing soldiers' reactions to casualties demonstrates again that popular discourses are only of limited influence on personal accounts, as the interviewees agree that one of the main consequences of casualties was a sense of desensitisation, resulting in attitudes which may be seen by a modern audience as disconcertingly callous. This is not a particularly attractive fact to acknowledge, and discomposure in these sections demonstrates the interviewees' discomfort. Arguably, maintaining that comrades were earnestly mourned would more easily fulfil popular discourses about the eternal bonds of comradeship which supposedly prevail in military units. However, the veterans are reluctant to resort to obvious clichés where they believe these are inaccurate, and there is enough space in the available cultural frameworks—since soldiers can also be

[793] Bourke, *Killing*.
[794] Fennell, *Combat and Morale*, p. 280.

seen as isolated and jaded figures—to suggest that interpersonal relationships were not particularly close and reactions to casualties were often quite muted.

Particularly encouraging for the prospects of oral history are instances where individual testimonies concur in spite of contrasting subjectivities. Where this occurs, one can be fairly certain the point of agreement reflects what really took place; the experiences of those individuals converged in a way which subjectivity cannot conceal or distort. A variety of personalities and strategies of composure are evident among both infantrymen and tank crews. These, however, do not obscure the distinction between the two in the way they discuss their level of tactical awareness or ability. Without disputing the fact that combat was highly chaotic and confusing for all involved, tank crewmen imply that they were better informed and able to influence events than infantrymen do, primarily because communication and the dissemination of intelligence were more common. Often the difference is merely that tank crew describe what they did, whereas infantry describe what was done to them. Nonetheless, the difference is striking and potentially significant. Since it is well recorded that tanks in fact produced highly disorientating conditions for their crews, it seems highly likely that this feature of the testimony reflects historical subjectivity rather than operational reality. The armour was not exceptionally effective, experiencing significant difficulties especially in Normandy, and heavily dependent on support from other arms; but the crews seem to have believed otherwise, and this helps to explain their combat motivation and tactical behaviour. This is a prime example of the human factors which oral history can illuminate.

Much information is also available about the 'nuts and bolts' of how the 1944-5 campaign was conducted at the lower levels. Most obviously, there are many practices and procedures recorded only in the memories of those who used them. Veterans can also give an impression of the mechanics of combat, or rather the fact combat was *not* obviously mechanical. Their testimony confounds the mechanistic assumptions about tactics which are endemic in popular writing and remain all too common in academia as well. It seems clear that tactical drills learned in training counted for little. Stephen Bull states that 'actions in the real world frequently broke down into a flurry of existential confusion that could on occasion make nonsense of drills or theory'.[795] In fact, the veterans' testimony strongly suggests that such situations were not occasional but routine, with success in combat being usually a matter of bluff and nerve, in which progress was made by overawing the enemy into withdrawing, rather than by enacting tactical stratagems aimed at killing him. Put another way, intimidating the enemy to force his withdrawal was the preferred tactic. The testimony therefore broadly validates the notion that the British infantryman was tactically naïve, tended to lack enthusiasm and required close supervision; however, this should not be seen as a failure in training or motivation so much as an inherent reality of modern warfare. It is clear that combat was a highly disorientating and disempowering situation for all involved, in which fear and self-preservation unsurprisingly trumped tactical theories. A failure of front-line soldiers to enact complex tactics should not be seen as evidence of any wider shortcomings in cohesion in British Army units. Nor can

[795] Bull, *Infantry Tactics*, p. xiii.

it be assumed on the basis of this evidence that the caution of front-line troops had a direct negative effect on the progress of higher operations.

While a conception of combat as determined by personal 'calculations of risk versus gain'[796] is strongly evidenced by the testimony, the validity and usefulness of veterans' testimony in the wider discussion of doctrine appears somewhat doubtful for several reasons. Firstly, the literature tends to focus on a higher level of command than that which the interviewees, usually concerned only with the company downwards, can comment on. Ultimately an interviewee can only relate what they originally experienced or perceived; the problem here is not with oral history as a research method *per se*, but with the information that is available to be tapped in the first place. Therefore, it is not altogether clear how the oral history and documentary approaches to doctrine can be usefully synergised, since they deal with different levels of command. In this case, oral history seems to add human detail but limited interpretative information.

Secondly, there must plainly have been common procedures in how troops went about their business both in and out of combat, but these are difficult to perceive. It was expected that such information would emerge, and indeed some did, but it was notably sparse and threadbare compared with the other issues investigated. There is no fundamental reason that veterans cannot provide useful information about standard procedures, from their personal point of view, but the interviewing process in this case is prejudicial to this end, and this is also likely to be the case with most

[796] Copp, *Fields of Fire*, p. 14.

archived interviews. This is because, in order to elicit testimony which can usefully be contextualised, a great deal of context must be understood and used to inform the questioning, including the particulars of the individual's unit, the specialist role of the individual in the unit, and the precise engagements or operations to be discussed. A focussed interviewing programme is also required, but most interviews, concerned with capturing an individual's entire war experiences in around one and a half hours, naturally concentrate on more general matters.

Even if the researcher is well-informed, it may be the case that some interviewees simply do not recall the specifics of events and procedures, requiring a larger number of interviews to be conducted before a usable amount of evidence is collected. It should not be expected that events can be easily located geographically or in terms of the understood battles and operations even with diligent research. As Richard Holmes noted, 'it is not merely that men forget. Very often they have no big picture to remember…Sometimes it is not until after the war that they discover where they were and what they achieved'.[797] By contrast, most interviewees will be able to provide some answer to generalisable questions such as 'How did you feel when friends were killed?' or 'What was your attitude to the enemy?', while the interviewer will require far less specialised knowledge of particular units and events. It is not inconceivable that a project designed with a very specific research goal in mind should be able to elicit testimony which illuminates it—it is simply the case that the vast majority of veteran's oral histories recorded to date do not suit this purpose in practice. To an

[797] Holmes, *Acts of War*, p. 154.

extent, the historian must approach this material on its own terms, rather than expecting it to provide the answer to any question.

In this way, issues of class and gender are also of interest but not particularly well illustrated. Class emerged in the clear distinctions between the accounts of officers and other ranks. Officers were as a whole relatively reticent about their own opinions and opted to describe events in terms of their entire units. They also demonstrated a staunch but perhaps condescending admiration for the stoicism of their working-class charges. There was relatively little outright discussion of class issues, however. Likewise, masculinity was not a subject which emerged explicitly, although many issues such as bravery and fear, physical endurance, and group loyalty can be seen as relating to typically masculine traits. It seems that as the Army constituted an overwhelmingly masculine environment (unlike the Home Guard)[798] there is little reason to separate gender issues from the simple fact of being soldiers. This can be seen as a logical consequence of the separation the veterans imply from wartime society as a whole. Arguably the invisibility of gender in the veterans' testimony allows them to more easily discuss traits such as sensitivity and compassion without their masculinity being undermined.[799] The main relevance of gender was in the intersubjective dynamics of the interview, as the veterans made statements to the male interviewer which they may have been more reticent to share with a female interviewer.

[798] Summerfield and Peniston-Bird, *Contesting Home Defence*.
[799] Partridge, 4, 01; Purver, 2, 36; Young, 1, 83-84.

The fact remains that there are many issues which such testimony can effectively illuminate. In the introduction it was suggested that oral testimony is peculiar in the analytical approaches required, but not in its interpretative usage, as the information it provides is not inherently different to that contained in any other source. Without undermining the fundamental validity of this statement, it is evidently challenging to recognise the effect of subjectivity during the analysis. Some subjectivity constitutes a part of historical experience, but some arises later, threatening to dilute the historical usefulness of the testimony. Therefore, it is vital to establish a theoretical distinction between historical subjectivity, which influenced human behaviour during the event itself, and retrospective subjectivity, which arose after the event took place. While retrospective subjectivity is unwelcome and potentially problematic, historical subjectivity is a fact of history like any other,[800] and for the historian a matter of interest rather than a problem to be overcome.

In many cases it is possible to envision historically subjective as well as real-world explanations for the testimony which is produced. For instance, veterans may downplay killing because in chaotic combat situations they really were quite unaware of whether they were killing; but at the same time such uncertainty provided reluctant killers sufficient grounds to persuade themselves that they had not killed. Grenades may have had their practical uses in dangerous combat situations, but it also seems likely that they were favoured as a weapon that permitted soldiers to distance themselves from their targets in a way which small arms did not. Infantrymen seriously downplay their agency, despite generally performing quite well; it seems likely that a

[800] Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, p. 50.

feeling of impotence was part and parcel of the front-line experience of even successful units. Meanwhile, tank crewmen may indeed have been better-informed and more tactically influential than the infantry, but since their tactical performance seems to have been more mixed than the testimony implies, it is likely also to reflect an *impression* of agency encouraged by access to communications networks, high unit cohesion and the feeling of security provided by their vehicles.

Furthermore, there are likely to be continuities between historical and retrospective subjectivity, which makes distinguishing between the two difficult. For instance, an infantry veteran might downplay his agency because he felt he had little at the time, or because he is encouraged to do so by popular discourses to that effect, or most likely a combination of the two. If soldiers did not relish killing during the war, they also have major retrospectively subjective reasons to avoid talking about killing in the present. To return to the example of grenades, historical subjectivity would describe how soldiers found them easier to use at the time, while retrospective subjectivity would describe how it is easier to talk in the present about using them; but the two are likely to be connected. The cultural circuit, in fact, suggests that such overlaps are unavoidable, because partly it is historical subjectivity which will produce those discourses which go on to provide frameworks for retrospective subjectivity. Historical reality and the two types of subjectivity are therefore extremely difficult to distinguish from each other.

Subjectivity as a whole is potentially problematic but also a significant opportunity, because it ensures that oral history illuminates those historically subjective factors which explain the human behaviour which is vitally important in the outcome of

military events. Oral testimony does contain facts, but if it *only* contained facts, it would be far less useful. For example, the difference between officers' and other ranks' accounts, such as officers' preference for the second-person rather than first-person pronoun, tells something of their contrasting concerns during the war. Again, identifying patterns which emerge in spite of subjectivity can indicate that the testimony reflects historical reality. Since popular memory gives all British soldiers good retrospectively subjective reasons to downplay their agency, then the divergence between infantry and armour accounts in this regard indicates there were differences in the experience of the war itself.

It is easy to see why oral historians show a preoccupation with exploring subjectivity, as it is so difficult to separate from the reality of what occurred (it should be remembered, however, that this applies to all retrospective accounts, not just spoken ones). This does not, however, justify wholeheartedly adopting a memory studies approach which presumes that understanding the past on its own terms is ultimately futile. The past can be interpreted and understood, however imperfectly.[801] Given that the research aims of oral historians diverge so significantly from conventional historical inquiry, it would probably be more productive to solve the problem of combining military history and oral history by suggesting better methodologies to military historians, rather than expecting oral historians to set aside their political concerns and preoccupation with present-day subjectivity and engage productively in the historical study of armies and warfare. It is to be hoped that improved understandings

[801] Tilly, 'People's History and Social Science History', pp. 462-3, 472; Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, pp. viii-ix, de Lee, 'Oral History', in Addison and Calder, *Time to Kill*, p. 361.

of subjectivity will proliferate among theory-averse military historians, allowing oral sources to be analysed more critically than previously and allowing them to be employed with more confidence when they do speak to historical subjectivity. In the future, there is scope for extending this approach to written memoirs as well,[802] deepening understandings of the place of personal sources in military history, better appreciating the subjectivity inherent in all sources, and re-evaluating the privileged position of documentary sources. Moreover, there is great potential for research into the cultural, institutional and commemorative motivations for the large-scale collection and consumption of veterans' oral testimony which has occurred since the 1970s and continues apace today.

If there is one common feature in all the accounts considered in this study, it is modesty. The fact that the British were soldiers, not warriors,[803] is evident throughout. As has been remarked previously, 'the recurring theme of British troops' testimonies of Normandy is that of getting the job done and surviving';[804] the rest of the campaign is no different. Clearly few enjoyed the war or took any pleasure from combat. All are willing to freely admit to this, suggesting that there was no stigma against hoping for a legitimate means of escape through wounding or even psychological exhaustion. There is, however, also a sense that the task was worth doing; the theme throughout is of soldiers doing an undesirable but vitally important job. Their modesty may account for the fact their performance has been denigrated by comparison with their

[802] For a welcome contribution to this end see Frances E. Houghton, '"Remembering with Advantages": British Military Memoirs of the Second World War, 1950-2010', PhD Thesis (University of Edinburgh, 2015).
[803] French, *Churchill's Army*, p. 154.
[804] Buckley, *British Armour*, p. 183.

more vocal German counterparts.[805] There is increasing historical consensus that the performance of the British Army in Northwest Europe has been underrated; by giving veterans the chance to give their side of the story, oral history can contribute to this rehabilitation.

Most soldiers were left with memories of the war which would remain with them for the rest of their lives. For some, the war was the most interesting period of their life, and their service the most important thing they would ever do; they would forever wear the identity of veteran. Oral history is bound to attract those who continue to view the war as the defining period of their life, perhaps looking back with nostalgia as much as remembrance. Yet it is important to moderate the temptation to view veterans as an undifferentiated group defined by the war alone and neglect the importance of their varied post-war experiences in their individual lives. These citizen soldiers would go on to lead full lives, of which the war was only one part, and for many far from the most important. To forget this is to downplay their individuality and ignore context vital to the way they tell their stories. Although most interviews deal only with wartime experiences, it is preferable to discuss civilian life too, in order to capture as full a picture of the individual and their subjectivity as possible.

A significant number of veterans are confident, enthusiastic and vocal narrators of their war experiences. Many are not, preferring to leave the war in the past. Others believe it is important to talk about the war, although this does not change the fact

[805] Kite, *Stout Hearts*, p. 408.

that it was an experience they did not relish and were relieved to see the end of. As reluctant soldier Barry Freeman recalls:

> I was demobbed from a camp at Hereford, and they gave us a nice civilian suit and hat and all the trimmings that go with it, and a train pass to get home, and at that time the trains, they ran direct to Birmingham through Hagley, where I lived all my life, and I got off the train at Hagley and my mother's shop was at the other end of the village, and I was walking down the village. I only saw two people, but I noticed from about halfway down how quiet it was. Silence. It was lovely. So, I was home. That was it.[806]

[806] Freeman, 1, 47-49.

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